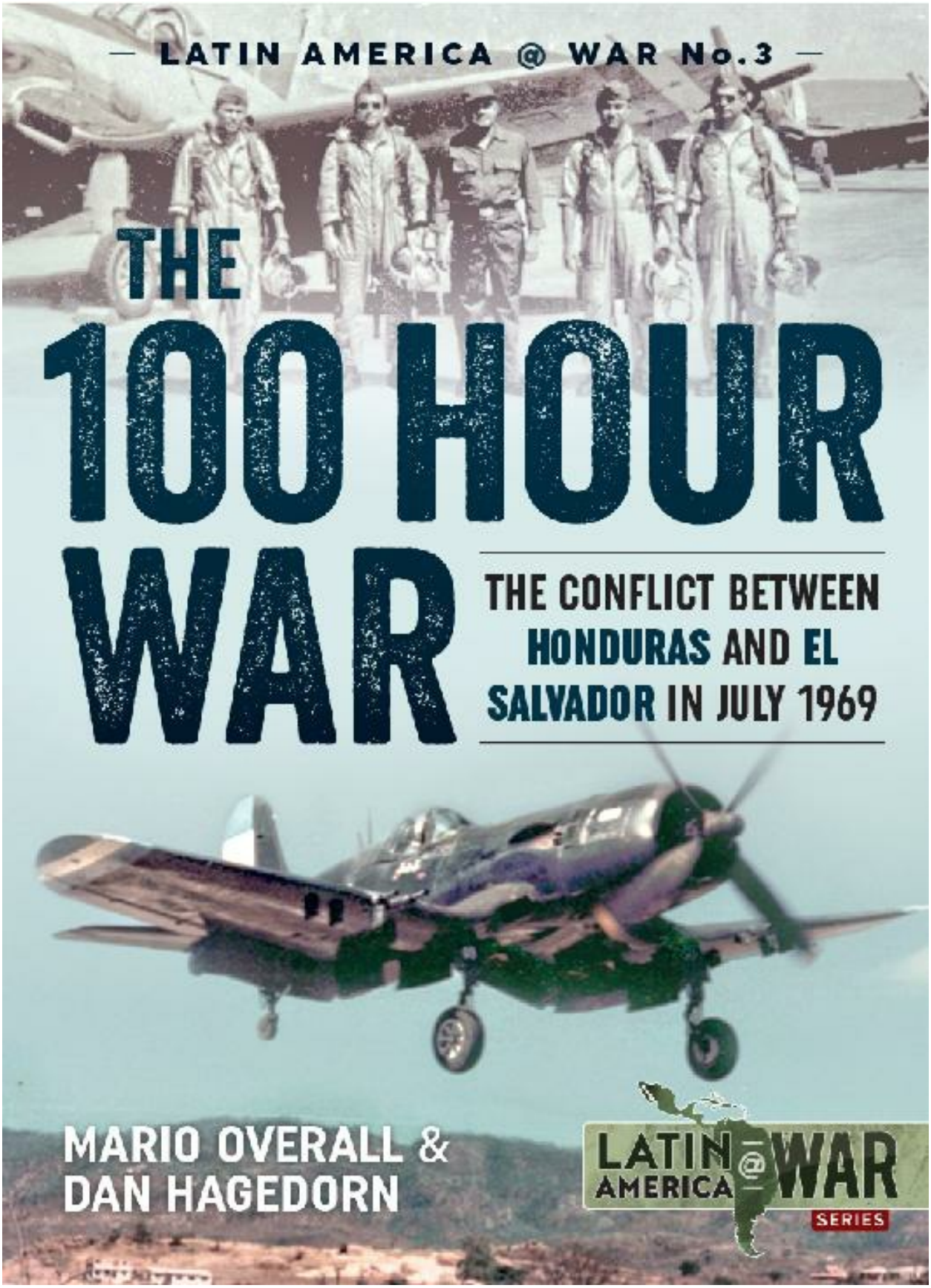
— LATIN AMERICA @ WAR No.3 —

THE 100 HOUR WAR

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR IN JULY 1969

MARIO OVERALL &
DAN HAGEDORN

LATIN AMERICA @ WAR SERIES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The 100 Hour War

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CONTENTS

Introduction

1 A War by Any Other Name

2 No Need for an Air Force

3 At Least We Have ‘That’

4 A ‘Massive’ Airstrike

5 Returning the Punch

6 Out of Steam

7 The Longest Day

8 Maximum Efforts

9 The War that No One Won

Appendices

A Salvadoran Air Force aircraft, July 1969

B Honduran Air Force aircraft, July 1969

Bibliography

Notes

Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

I recall vividly that hot Monday morning, July 14, 1969.

I had just returned from a mission to Ecuador and was preparing an After-Action Report when the TWX printer started chattering in the neighboring office, which by then was at Fort Kobbe in the former Panama Canal Zone.

When my boss tore off the five-page message, I was astonished to read that El Salvador had launched hostilities against neighboring Honduras.

Details were still scant, and even the staff at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador expressed surprise early-on.

Later that morning, while glancing out the window, I saw an FAS Douglas C-47 on final into neighboring Howard Air Force Base, and drove over to the transient ramp to see what was going on. Shortly, a small convoy of blue USAF trucks and buses moved out onto the ramp and about a dozen assorted military personnel hastily boarded the C-47. A driver told me they were Salvadoran students who had been in various courses at the Inter-American Air Forces Academy at Albrook AFB and the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Fort Davis, being rushed home in the heat of the moment. The C-47, FAS-103, immediately fired-up and departed westward.

Most observers of the so-called 100-Hour War probably don't realize that the conflict of 1969, in reality, still remains active after more than 40 years. Despite a formal peace agreement, not signed until October 30, 1980. and a decision handed down by the International Court of justice as well as various rulings by the OAS, the root causes persist to this day.

Fast forward to the late 1990s. Our youngest son, Joey, had just completed a two-year stint with the Peace Corps in El Salvador, and had become engaged to a beautiful young lady of the capital. They married, and we sponsored her for U.S. citizenship. During many subsequent conversations, she provided me with a very intimate, second-hand account of the 1969 conflict from the perspective of her parents, average citizens, which was illuminating but, perhaps not surprisingly, extremely ethnocentric.

And so, with those personal experiences in mind, and my dear friend and colleague Mario Overall in agreement that it was time, we decided to make a

fresh attempt at sorting out the seemingly inevitable maze of myths, half-truths and gross exaggerations that have gained a life of their own during the intervening years. We appreciate our publisher agreeing to entertain this study.

There remain many aspects that we wish dearly that we understood more clearly, but which, in the complete absence of concrete evidence, may remain the stuff of outrageous claims and counter-claims forever. That seems to be the way of even brief and obscure human conflicts.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of this sad episode remains that it settled nothing. The political power of the military in both nations was reinforced; the social situation in El Salvador worsened and, perhaps inevitably, the extremely unfortunate 10-year Salvadoran Civil War followed.

Our focus, as will be seen, has been on the aviation aspects of the war, which, in spite of everything, remain historically significant for many reasons. When all is said and done, it was the last conflict in which propeller-driven combat aircraft engaged in air-to-air warfare, the likes of which we shall almost certainly never see again.

Dan Hagedorn
Maple Valley
April 2017

1

A WAR BY ANY OTHER NAME

There were simply way too many newsworthy events going on in the world during the second week of July 1969, such as the upcoming launching of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon and the first withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. The overworked media certainly didn't need another war to cover, and much less if it was taking place in some forgotten corner of the planet. But it happened: While the world was looking the other way, the Central American nations of Honduras and El Salvador crossed sabres in a short but intense conflict that would shape the politics of the region for years to come.

With little understanding of its true causes, and pressed to come up with a catchy headline, the English-spoken newspapers began calling it 'The Soccer War',[1] because the outbreak of hostilities had coincided with the elimination rounds for the 1970 Jules Rimet soccer World Cup, in which the warring countries were participating. According to the media, Salvadorans and Hondurans had clashed due to an out-ofhand sports passion, stereotypical of the hotheaded *Latinos.*

In any case, the derogatory term coined by the newspapers and the mistaken notion about the conflict they spread back in the day, which has been repeated endlessly by different historical sources, has only served to denigrate the inhabitants of the two countries involved. Far from being moved by simple worldly passions, a supposed blood lust or an insensate love for war, Hondurans and Salvadorans ended up facing each other due to serious political and economic problems that had their roots in the early twentieth century and not in a soccer stadium.

In order to understand the true cause of the '100 Hour War', as the Hondurans knew it, or 'The War of Legitimate Defence, as the Salvadorans called it, we must go back in time, to the late 1800s, when the US began exerting a strong political and economic influence over the Central American nations. That influence had allowed the United Fruit Company - UFCO and

its rival, the Standard Fruit Company, to establish enormous banana plantations in the region, but most prominently in the Caribbean coast of Honduras, where both companies had also built ports and ancillary installations, besides taking over the country's communication and transportation businesses.

With the exponential growth of banana production, it became evident for both companies that the Honduran workers were not sufficient in numbers and that they needed to bring in an additional workforce from neighbouring countries. Thus, with the acquiescence of the Honduran government, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran peasants were hired and allowed to settle near the plantations located in the departments of Cortés, Atlántida and Yoro. During the following years, however, the Salvadorans became a majority[2] due to their country's political instability and the crash of the coffee market that forced the Salvadoran coffee producers to lay off a great number of peasants, who ended up migrating to the northern coast of Honduras, looking for jobs.

This exodus increased considerably in January 1932, when the Salvadoran Communist Party, led by Augustín Farabundo Martí and supported by a handful of agrarian unions, revolted against the government of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. This uprising led to an unprecedented repression campaign launched by the Salvadoran Army, which left no less than 30,000 dead, mostly poor peasants and Indians, and forced the displacement of a large number of the rural population towards Honduras,[3] a displacement that continued during the next 30 years. Surprisingly, the Honduran government welcomed the presence of the Salvadorans and generally tolerated their lack of a legal status, since it did not require them to become citizens.

The main office of the Tela Railroad Company at the port of Tela, Honduras. This was the parent company of the infamous United Fruit Co., which established enormous banana plantations along the Caribbean coast of the Central American region. (Photo credit: The Tela Railroad Company)

By April 1954, the left-leaning government of neighbouring Guatemala, led by Lieutenant Colonel Jacobo Arbenz, had successfully expropriated land from the UFCO and was redistributing it to poor peasants across the country. Government officials and members of agrarian unions were also spreading propaganda about the social and labour reforms that the country had achieved since the Revolution of October 1944, and encouraged the workers and peasants of the rest of the Central American countries to rise up against US imperialism[4] and the local oligarchs. At the time, however, the Central Intelligence Agency - CIA was preparing a clandestine operation to overthrow Arbenz, and the ‘Liberation Army’ that was to be used for invading the country was stationed in Honduras. Inevitably, Arbenz got wind of the CIA’s intentions and set out to destabilize the government of President Juan Manuel Gálvez in order to cut his support for the rebel army. For this, Arbenz enlisted Guatemalan union workers and members of the Communist Party to infiltrate the UFCO’s banana plantations along the northern coast of Honduras, where they induced strikes, which in early May, had spread to the

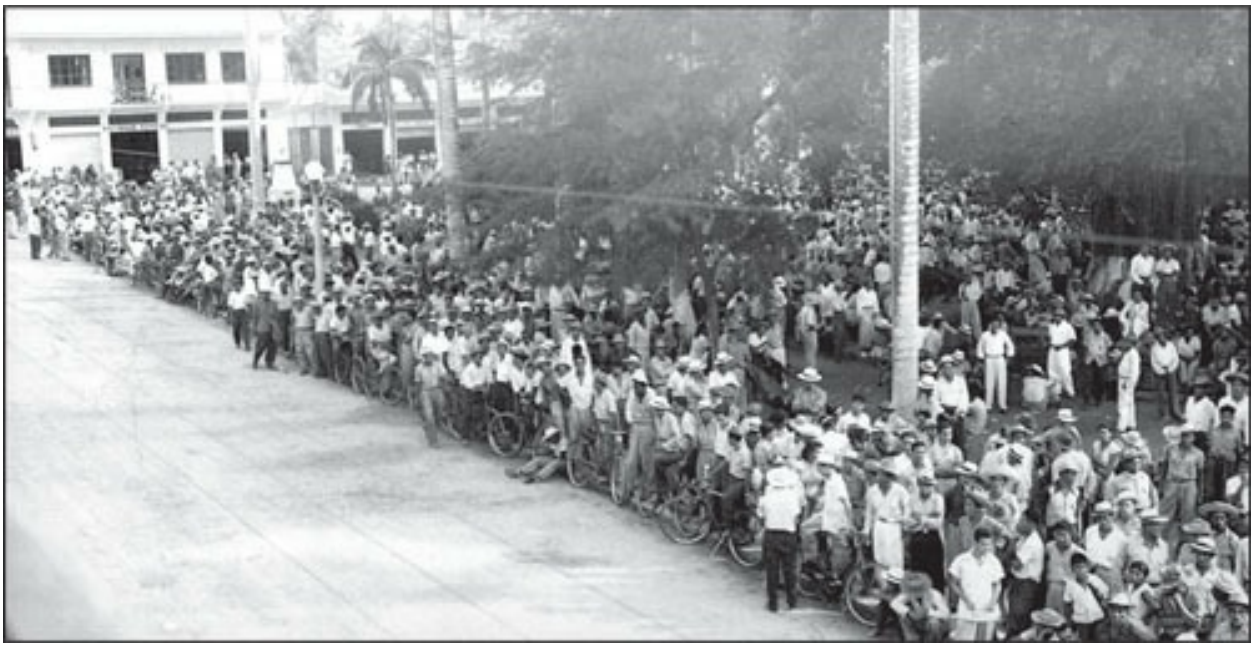
ports of Tela and Cortés and the UFCO facilities at La Lima and El Progreso.[5] Additionally, agitators were sent to the country's capital, Tegucigalpa, and its second largest city, San Pedro Sula, where they organised riots that effectively paralysed Honduras. In the end, President Gálvez had to send troops to quell what by then was a general strike that included other UFCO subsidiaries, two mining companies, the Honduran Brewing Company and the British-American Tobacco Company.

The SS *Cartago,* one of the ships operated by the United Fruit Co. in Honduras. (Photo credit: The Tela Railroad Company)

The direct outcome of the 'great strike of 1954' was the conformation of the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de Tela Railroad Company* (the Tela Railroad Company Workers' Union) that grouped all the UFCO's employees, and the *Sindicato the Trabajadores de Standard Fruit Company* (the Standard Fruit

Company Workers' Union), which was its counterpart at the Standard Fruit Company. Together, these two unions formed the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Honduras* - CTH (the Honduras Workers' Confederation), a major force that was capable of influencing government policies. In fact, one of the first tasks undertaken by the CTH was the organisation of the poor peasants and agrarian workers into their own union, so they could demand land from the government.

Workers unloading bananas from a train, and loading them into a ship, at the La Ceiba port, Honduras. (Photo credit: The Tela Railroad Company)



United Fruit workers on strike at El Progreso, in the Yoro department, Honduras, in 1954. (Photo credit: Rafael Platero Paz Archives)

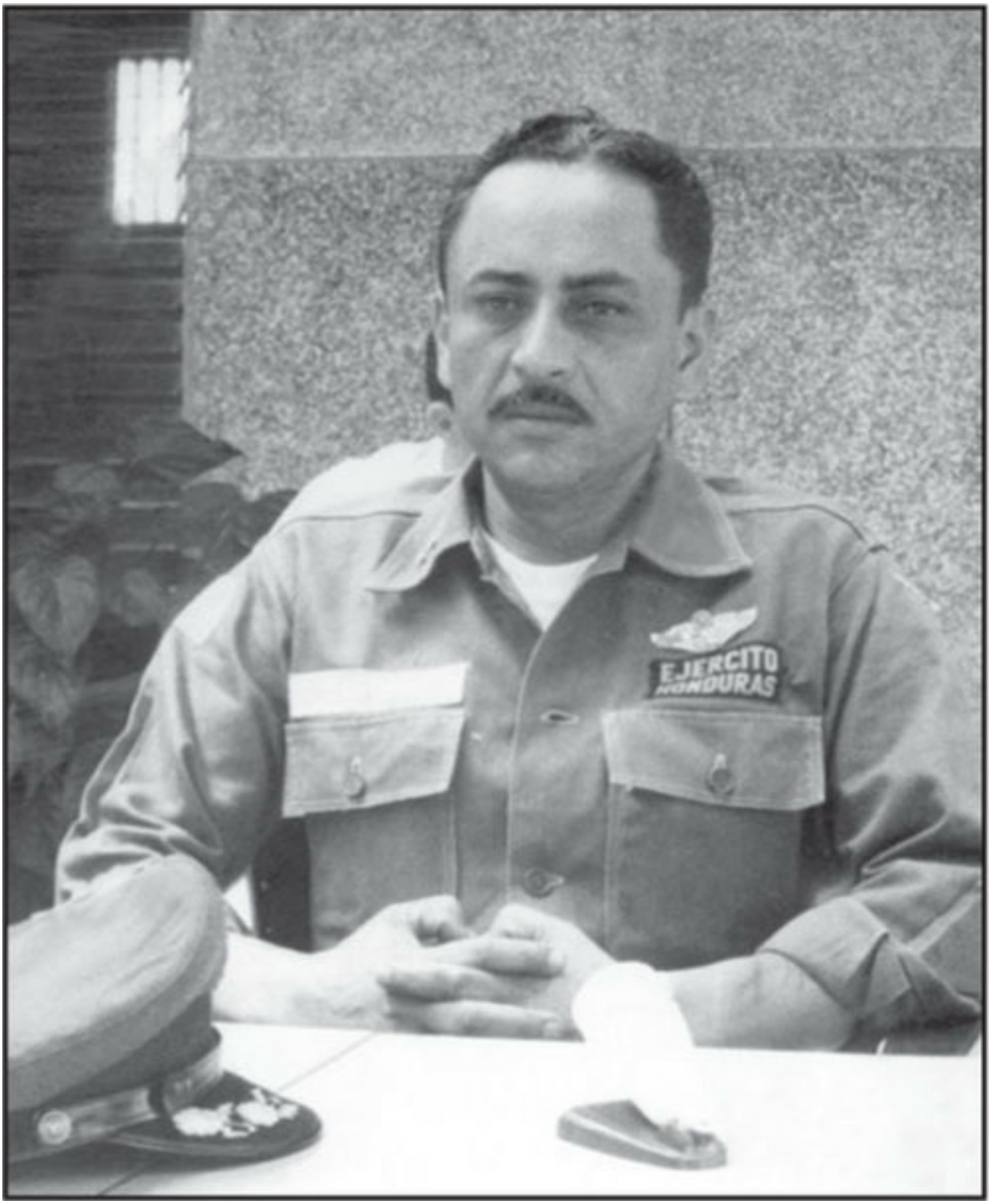
By then, according to a census of the Honduran government, there were 300,000 Salvadorans living and working in Honduras, with 40 percent of them being employed by the banana companies, while the rest were peasants who grew crops in tracts of land they had occupied illegally, and even though there was some animosity towards them on the part of the Honduran population, their lives were relatively peaceful. That is, until the *Instituto Agrario Nacional* - INA (the National Agrarian Institute) and the CTH began considering them as suitable targets for land expropriation under the Agrarian Reform Law that was being discussed in Congress.

Fearing that the land expropriations would be followed by a massive expulsion of Salvadorans, that country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed an Immigration Treaty with the Honduran government, but it did little to stop the harassment of the Salvadoran peasants. It was at this time that the El Salvador government began considering a military solution to the 'Honduran problem'. Accordingly, the officers that formed the Army's General Staff dusted off an existing proposal for a hypothetical invasion of Guatemala in case that country fell into the hands of communism, and set out to adapt it into an operation against Honduras.

By then, the Guatemalan rebel movement, which had been started by young Army officers in November 1960, was receiving training, funds and

equipment from Fidel Castro's Cuba thanks to the mediation of local Marxist organisations that were also providing recruits for the nascent guerrilla groups. Hence, during the previous couple of months the Guatemalan *guerrilleros* had been launching attacks with deadly precision against military targets along the Motagua Valley, close to the Honduran and Salvadoran border, shocking the Guatemalan Army's high command that then realised that they were no longer fighting a disorganised band of outlaws. Obviously, the governments of Honduras and El Salvador, fearing that the Guatemalan guerrillas could operate beyond Guatemala's borders, were closely watching these serious developments while preparing their own armed forces for any eventuality. On its part, US intelligence was quick to determine that this was Castro's first attempt to export the Cuban Revolution to Central America. Hence, without wasting any time, the US Army Caribbean Command was ordered to organise unprecedented counter-insurgency exercises in the region, with the first of these, named *Operación Fraternidad'*[6] (Operation Fraternity), taking place in Honduras in early September 1962.

Banana workers at a union meeting during the 1954 strike that paralysed Honduras. (Photo credit: Life Magazine)



General Oswaldo López Arellano, the de facto President of Honduras from 1963 to 1971. (Photo credit: Government of Honduras)

Besides troops from the host country, combat units from Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador were invited to the exercise, that was aimed at '[demonstrating] the cooperation and the capabilities of Western Hemisphere nations to respond to a request by the Organization of American States (OAS) to assist a member nation in the conduct of operations against an aggressor'.[7] Besides the feverish activity that the Salvadoran Military Attaché to Honduras had been conducting in order to collect intelligence on that country's armed forces, *Fraternidad* provided an excellent opportunity for the Salvadoran officers participating in the exercise to observe them in action and add that experience to their own analysis of their counterpart's strengths and weaknesses.

Less than two weeks after *Fraternidad* had ended, the Honduran Agrarian Reform Law was finally enacted by Congress, and even though it wasn't implemented right away, it placed the Salvadoran peasants living in Honduras in a rather vulnerable position, because the law considered only Honduran-born citizens for land redistribution.[8]

In October 1963, a coup d'etat led by Colonel Oswaldo López Arellano overthrew Honduran President Ramón Villeda Morales, marking the beginning of a long period of political repression and institutionalised violence, during which, a clandestine armed group known as the *'Mancha Brava'* set out to eliminate the enemies of the regime.[9] To make things worse, the discontent of local peasants began to manifest itself through the violent seizure of government and private lands along the Caribbean coast, and in most cases, the subsequent expulsions were done by force. On their part, the Honduran landowners and cattle ranchers, organised in the *Federación Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Honduras* - FENAGH (Honduran National Federation of Farmers and Cattle Ranchers) didn't lose any time in taking measures aimed at quelling the illegal occupations. For this, they demanded the expulsion of the Salvadoran peasants who didn't want to obtain the Honduran nationality and the expropriation of their lands so they could be redistributed among locals. Shortly after, in the departments of Yoro and Olancho, where large tracts of land had been selected for establishing paper mills, several Salvadorans refused to be expropriated, and were promptly accused by the local press of delaying the progress of the

country. Even the left-leaning agrarian and labour unions grouped in the CTH did their part in fuelling the anti-Salvadoran sentiment.[10]

Colonel Fidel Sánchez Hernández, President of El Salvador from 1967 to 1972. (Photo credit: Government of El Salvador)

As expected, the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs rushed to negotiate yet another immigration treaty with the Honduran government in order to protect the peasants, and by July 1965, both governments signed the Declaration of Marcala,[11] which sought to strengthen relations between the two countries and encouraged the regularization of the immigration problem. Such a treaty was shortlived, however, because the Honduran government realised that El Salvador was benefitting the most from the liberalization of the region's commerce under the Central American Common Market Treaty, also known in Spanish as *Mercomún*, while Honduras was the most affected.[12] Shortly after, resentment began to build amongst the Honduran economic sector, and it didn't take long for the government to denounce the commercial agreements signed with El Salvador, prompting the suspension of the treaty the following year.

The ill-defined border between the two countries also became the source of several incidents that strained their relations even more, mainly because the Salvadoran authorities, in pursuit of criminals who swarmed the area, crossed into Honduras and sometimes clashed with their Honduran counterparts. Moreover, there were many Salvadoran families that had seized tracts of land close to the border, thinking that they were inside El Salvador, and when the Honduran authorities tried to expel them, they usually resisted violently.

In September 1965, the US Army Southern Command - SOUTHCOM organised a second joint counter-insurgency exercise, named *'Halcón Vista'*, that also took place in Honduras. This time, however, the only participating nations besides the host country were Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. Salvadoran officers attending the exercise set out once again to collect intelligence on their potential enemies. Obviously, the influx of fresh information was greatly welcomed by Salvadoran Army planners who, by then, had revised the invasion plan, now officially called *'Plan de Campaña Capitán General Gerardo Barrios'*[13] (Captain General Gerardo Barrios Campaign Plan), in honour of a prestigious Salvadoran officer who defeated a Honduran invasion in 1845.

It is worth noting here that the Salvadoran planners were using the term 'invasion' loosely, since the main idea wasn't a total occupation of the Honduran territory or seizing Tegucigalpa in order to establish a puppet

government, as the press reported it at the time. El Salvador simply did not have the military capability to launch such a campaign. On the contrary, what the Salvadorans intended was to effect a movement distributed around multiple fronts, allowing the taking of Honduran territory and the capture of the main border towns, and then requesting the intervention of the OAS to force a negotiated solution. The plan also considered some opportunistic advances in order to seize towns deep inside Honduras, but it would depend on the availability of supplies and, most importantly, on establishing an efficient logistics chain.

Vought F4U-5Ns of the Honduran Air Force conducting live-fire training during a counterinsurgency exercise at Danlí, Honduras, in 1965. (Photo Credit: Honduran Air Force)

Goodyear FG-1D, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-220, at Ilopango Airport during the emergency of June 1967. The camouflage pattern sported by this airplane had been hastily applied to all the Salvadoran Corsairs during the last week of May of that year, and remained in use until after the war. (Photo credit: Dan Hagedorn Collection)

By mid-1967, there were serious clashes between Honduras and El Salvador, which, undoubtedly, hastened the implementation of the invasion plan of the latter. The first of these occurred on 25 May, when members of the Salvadoran *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) crossed into Honduras near the Lajitas River, in the La Paz department, and stormed the *Hacienda Dolores*[14] (Dolores Ranch), arresting its owner, Colonel Antonio Martínez Argueta, on charges of murder. The problem was that Colonel Martínez Argueta, besides being a wealthy and renowned Army officer, was also a close friend of Honduran President López Arellano, to the point that the Salvadoran press misidentified him as a close relative. The same day, members of the *Guardia Nacional* clashed with Honduran troops at the town of La Florida, 10km north of the border, also in the La Paz department, leaving four Salvadoran guards and four Honduran troops dead. Then, on 29 May, Salvadoran guards crossed into Honduras once again, and after a heavy firefight with Honduran troops, stormed *Hacienda Dolores* for a second time, burning it to the ground. Heated exchanges between the two governments followed, and to make things worse, on 5 June, four trucks packed-full of *Guardia Nacional* members were captured[15] (some sources say they turned themselves in) at the provincial capital of Nueva Ocotepeque, after crossing into Honduras at the border post of El Poy.

Part of the Salvadoran armament captured by the Honduran authorities at Nueva Ocotepeque, during the emergency of June 1967. (Photo credit: Via Col. César Elvir Sierra)

Days later, when the incident was being investigated, the two officers in charge of the contingent, Lieutenants Erick Sosa and Inocente Montano, stated that they both had fallen sleep and didn't realise that they had crossed into Honduras until they were captured at the central plaza of Nueva Ocotepeque. The Salvadoran people, quick with a joke, began calling them *'Bellos Durmientes* (Sleeping Beauties).

Thomas P. Anderson, a historian who was in El Salvador during the war and wrote a book on the subject, gives a more somber explanation for this ignominious episode: "It seems that [President] López Arellano was very put out by the arrest of his friend Martínez Argueta and decided on a plan to grab some hostages of his own." Anderson adds:

> The important Honduran garrison town of Santa Rosa de Copán was the headquarters of the commandant of the Third Military District, Col. Arnoldo Alvarado Dubón. On 22 May 1967, there had been an incident of violence in Tegucigalpa, when his son Oscar Armando Alvarado had apparently shot an officer, but was himself killed by Capt. Moisés Reyes Arellano, a close associate of the president who was acquitted subsequently. This made it seem plausible that Colonel Alvarado might lead a coup against the unstable government of López Arellano. Thus, the government of Honduras hatched a plot in which Colonel Alvarado was to send word to the military

> in El Salvador of such intentions, in an effort to lure some soldiers into their hands. He told the Salvadoreans [sic] that a number of garrisons would rise up, but that a certain amount of military aid would be necessary from El Salvador. Vexed with the migration problem, [President Julio Adalberto] Rivera and [Fidel] Sánchez Hernández (the president-elect and real leader at this time) took the bait. They arranged with Alvarado to supply troops in the Ocotepeque region and elsewhere along the border for a projected coup on June 5. Thus, the elements which crossed the border at El Poy were part of a much larger plot.[16]

In any case, there is evidence that the Salvadoran armed forces went on general alert[17] the night before the incident occurred, allegedly to 'preserve the sovereignty of the menaced fatherland'. Even the rather ill-equipped *Fuerza Aérea Salvadoreña* - FAS (Salvadoran Air Force) prepared for action, and its Goodyear FG-1D Corsair fighters-bombers, up to then painted in bright aerobatic colours, received a hastily applied camouflage pattern that was still in use when the 1969 war began. Moreover, the Honduran Foreign Affairs Ministry reported that, with the arrest of the Salvadoran guards in Ocotepeque, the authorities had seized two 9mm machine guns, four 51mm mortars, 15 Madsen light machine guns and no less than 21 *Mauser* carbines, plus a considerable amount of ammunition;[18] these being additional to what the guards were carrying. Even though no explanations were given about the cache of weapons the Salvadorans guards were transporting, it isn't too far-fetched to think that their intention was to equip at least some civilians to support the alleged coup against López Arellano. In the end, the potentially disastrous situation was defused when Colonel Alvarado was exchanged for the Salvadoran guards thanks to the good offices of US President Lyndon B. Johnson.

In July 1967, after the inauguration of the newly elected President of El Salvador, Colonel Fidel Sánchez Hernández, the Salvadoran Army finally set out to implement the plan for invading Honduras. According to Anderson,[19] the then recent 'Hundred-Hour War, in which Israel had knocked out a numerically superior opponent (Egypt), had captured the Salvadoran officers' imagination and they didn't hesitate in incorporating many elements inspired by that campaign into their own invasion plan. Anderson adds that by then, the Salvadorans perceived themselves as "the Israelis of Central America", ambitious, technical-minded people, surrounded by "lazy Arabs", that is, their Central American neighbours.

Salvadoran troops standing beside their ‘Rayos’. These were locally-modified REO M35 2½-ton trucks that had armour plates and .50 cal machine guns installed, effectively transforming them into armoured personnel carriers. (Photo credit: El Salvador Government)

The invasion plan was comprised of three well-defined phases aimed at preparing not only the armed forces, but also the entire country for war. The first phase had the objective of increasing the number of troops and acquiring the necessary combat equipment. Accordingly, during the following weeks, the Army started a nationwide recruiting campaign, followed by the activation of reserves and the creation of a paramilitary organisation for supporting the war effort. An exhaustive training programme was then established, which included conducting tactical exercises across the country. The surprising part was that all these activities were conducted with utmost secrecy, denoting a high degree of organisation and efficiency on the part of the Defence Ministry and the Army’s high command.

In April 1968, Salvadoran troops were deployed to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, for yet another counter-insurgency exercise organised by SOUTHCOM, along with combat units from Guatemala and Honduras, and those from the host country. The timing couldn’t have been better because, besides having a one-off chance to test some of the newly recruited troops, the Salvadoran officers attending the exercise had another great opportunity to collect up-to-date tactical intelligence on the Hondurans.

Less than a month later, the US embassy to El Salvador presented to President Sánchez a report[20] detailing the results of a thorough analysis of the Salvadoran armed forces that the US Military Group - MilGroup for El Salvador had conducted during the second half of 1967. The document recommended the implementation of a "modernization program" for the armed forces in order to improve their capabilities against potential communist threats in the region. Once again, the timing couldn't have been better because the Ministry of Defence, following the implementation of the invasion plan, was about to acquire critical assets such as combat and utility vehicles, uniforms, communication equipment and enough infantry weapons and munitions to equip no less than three new battalions. Not wasting any time, the Salvadoran government made the MilGroup's recommendation its own, and through the US Military Sales Program (MSP), acquired the weapons and equipment that the report suggested. Far from the eyes of the North Americans, however, the government went on a shopping spree[21] to acquire the additional armament required for the campaign, which included 5,000 Heckler & Koch G-3 rifles, 200 HK21 machine guns and three million 7.62x51mm rounds of ammunition. Also, under the cover of the modernization programme, the Salvadoran Army began modifying its REO M35 2½-ton trucks by installing armour plates on them, plus radios and .50 calibre machine guns, effectively transforming them into armoured personnel carriers that were called '*Rayos*' (Thunderbolts) by the members of the *Escuadrón de Caballería Motorizada* (Motorised Cavalry Squadron.)

By the end of the year, the Salvadoran Army was capable of fielding seven infantry battalions plus a commando-type company equipped with the newly acquired G-3 rifles and HK21 machine guns, but also with older M1 Garand rifles and M2 carbines that were already at hand. For its part, the *Grupo de Artillería* (Artillery Group) had two battalions equipped with M2A1 105mm and M116 75mm howitzers, as well as several 81mm and 51mm mortars, and M1 37mm antiaircraft guns. The *Escuadrón de Caballería Motorizada,* on the other hand, was capable of deploying not only the modified M35 trucks, but also a couple of M3A1 Stuart tanks and an array of locally modified civilian armoured cars, which were nicknamed '*Las Niñas*' (The Girls) due to the screaming sound that their unmuffled engines made.

Finally, but importantly, the modernization programme also reached the *Guardia Nacional,* and its two infantry battalions were equipped with G-3 rifles, HK21 machine guns and the inevitable M1 Garands and M2 carbines.

Additionally, the *Guardia* had attached a paramilitary organisation called *Organización Democrática Nacionalista* (National Democratic Organization), or ORDEN, comprised of 6,000 civilians, whose equipment ranged from machetes to Ml rifles.

2

NO NEED FOR AN AIR FORCE

By mid-1968, the invasion plan was being implemented in a remarkable fashion and quite rapidly by the Salvadoran armed forces. However, it contained a fundamental oversight: the Ministry of Defence had left the FAS out of the so-called modernization programme. In fact, the officers of the General Staff were undecided about whether they should equip three additional infantry battalions or yield to the repeated requests of the FAS Commander, Major Salvador Adalberto Henriquez, for combat planes.

The root of the problem was that the Salvadoran armed forces' leadership was comprised entirely of infantry officers, who had a serious problem grasping the concept of airpower and didn't quite understand the importance of having an air force. According to them, the Salvadoran Army was self-sufficient and didn't need any of the other branches of the armed forces for accomplishing its mission. In the case of the FAS, these officers thought that the air arm's only acceptable roles were to provide tactical transport and close air support for the ground troops. Such was the disdain for the FAS that it had been effectively relegated to nothing more than an '*air cuartel*', having the same status as any of the conventional Army garrisons, and all movements of its personnel and equipment had to be previously approved by the Ministry of Defence. To make things worse, Major Henriquez held a lower rank than that of the rest of the officers at the General Staff, making it very difficult for him to be heard regarding the air arm's requirements, and his requests were usually put aside and his points of view summarily dismissed.[1]

A Trans Florida Aviation F-51D Mustang II while on its ferry flight to El Salvador. The airplane was photographed at Howard AFB, in the Panama Canal Zone, a couple of days before its delivery to the Salvadoran Air Force in September 1968. (Photo credit: Dan Hagedorn Collection)

This toxic infantry-centred mentality was also responsible for another crucial error that the Salvadoran Army planners committed when evaluating the available intelligence on the Honduran armed forces prior to the war: They chose to ignore, or at least underestimate, the capability of the *Fuerza Aérea Hondureña* – FAH (the Honduran Air Force.) They couldn't plead ignorance, however, because during the joint counter-insurgency exercises organised by the US between 1962 and 1968, the FAH had been the sole provider of combat air support with its fighter-bomber squadron, and the Salvadoran officers attending those exercises had several opportunities to see the Honduran pilots in action.

In any case, the Salvadoran Ministry of Defence saw no need to acquire a large quantity of fighter aircraft, at least equivalent to the type the Hondurans had, and ended up purchasing only five Trans Florida Aviation F-51D Mustang IIs and a single dual-control Cavalier-refurbished TF-51D, under special provisions of the US MSP. It is worth mentioning here that the MilGroup's study had originally suggested the acquisition of no less than 14 fighter-bombers,[2] mainly for conducting counter-insurgency and air superiority missions.

Upon their arrival, in September 1968, these versatile airplanes were

incorporated into the languishing *Escuadrón de Caza-Bombardeo* (Fighter-Bomber Squadron), at the time equipped with the last five airworthy Goodyear FG-1D Corsairs of the 20 acquired in 1957 under the US Military Assistance Sales (MAS) programme. By then, the rest of the FAS' inventory was made entirely of a motley array of barely flyable aircraft that included, besides the Mustang IIs and the Corsairs already mentioned, a North American SNJ-5 Texan armed trainer, five Cessna U-17As utility light airplanes, six Cessna T-41 primary trainers, four Douglas C-47 transports and a Canadair DC-4M medium transport. These aircraft comprised the *Grupo de Combate* (Combat Group), which was based at the Ilopango International Airport on the outskirts of El Salvador's capital, San Salvador, where the FAS' headquarters, and the only maintenance facilities, were located.

Douglas C-47, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-101, was one of four transports of the type that the Salvadorans operated during the war, many of them as makeshift bombers. (Photo credit: BG Hal Ahrens via Dan Hagedorn)

Cavalier TF-51D Mustang, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-400, photographed shortly after its arrival in Ilopango. This airplane was the only dual-control Mustang that the Salvadoran air arm had. (Photo credit: Dan Hagedorn Collection)

The Cessna U-17As of the Salvadoran Air Force, besides their role as utility airplanes, participated in several 'attack' missions during the war, including the initial airstrike that the Salvadorans launched against several Honduran targets on 14 July. (Photo credit: Chuck Lyford)

For its part, the *Grupo de Combate* had three squadrons, namely the

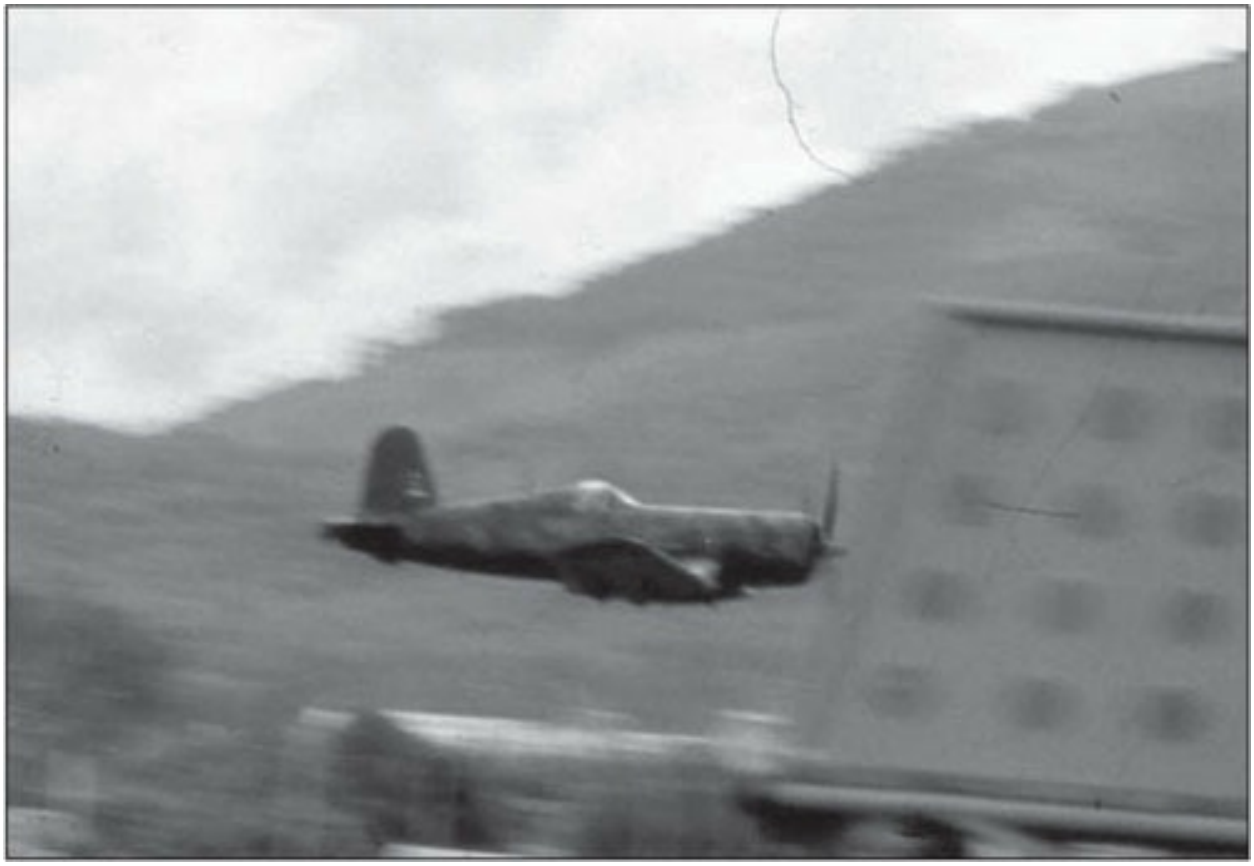
Escuadrón de Caza-Bombardeo mentioned earlier, *Escuadrón de Transporte* (Transport Squadron) equipped with C-47s and the DC-4M, and *Escuadrón de Reconocimiento* (Reconnaissance Squadron) that operated the SNJ-5, U-17As and T-41s. Additionally, the FAS had a *Grupo de Mantenimiento y Abastecimiento* (Maintenance and Supply Group) consisting of an *Escuadrón de Mantenimiento* (Maintenance Squadron) and *Escuadrón de Abastecimiento* (Supply Squadron). There was also a *Grupo de Servicios de Base* (Base Services Group) comprised of an *Escuadrón Médico* (Medical Squadron), *Escuadrón de Servicios de Alimentación* (Food Services Squadron) and *Policía Militar* (Military Police). Finally, yet importantly, the FAS had an *Escuadrón Aerotransportado* (Airborne Squadron) – actually a paratrooper company that was nominally assigned to the air force, but had its own base and was under control of the Army most of the time.

Regarding its personnel, there were 1,000 men serving with the FAS, of which only 34 were pilots. In a report by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Griemsmann, Chief of the Air Force Section of the MilGroup for El Salvador, the Salvadoran aviators were described as “good, eager, and extremely familiar with their country’s terrain”. There was a downside, nevertheless, because Lieutenant Colonel Griemsmann also reported that:

> [T]hey restrict their flying to daylight, fair weather exclusively, however, and the only instrument [flying] experience they have had is in the right seat of the USAF Mission’s C-47 on its flights to Panama. Therefore, there is little or no surveillance of the sensitive Honduran border area or the frontier with Guatemala, which some day may harbor fleeing Guatemalan Communist rebels.

Moreover, not all were permanently available because, to make ends meet, the FAS had some of them assigned to local airline TACA and to a couple of aerial crop-dusting companies, while a dedicated crew periodically flew the DC-4M transport to Miami, carrying lobsters[3] on behalf of local export firms. Other officers had to attend the Army’s Command and General Staff Course in order to be promoted, and once they had started this course, they were not allowed to fly until finishing it. The lack of flying time, and to some extent, the inexperience in a ‘hot’ aircraft type like the Mustang II, took its toll on 8 October 1968, when the airplane serialled FAS-402 crashed[4] while taking off from Ilopango. Both the pilot in command, Major Oscar Nelson Bolaños Estrada, and his observer, Lieutenant Leonel Lovo Pérez, had to be taken to hospital with serious injuries. (All the Mustang IIs had a small seat in the

back of the cockpit, where a passenger/observer could ride, albeit very uncomfortably.) A couple of weeks later, the Mustang II with the serial FAS-405 suffered a propeller strike while landing at the airfield on Madresal Island, where it remained for almost two weeks until being repaired by FAS mechanics.



One of the Goodyear FG-1Ds of the Salvadoran Air Force, sporting a full camouflage pattern, photographed during the 'Day of the Soldier' celebrations at San Salvador on 7 May 1968. (Photo credit: Via Marco Lavagnino)

The Canadair DC-4M (C-54GM), Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-300, was the only medium transport that the service had when the war began. This photograph was taken during one of the visits of the airplane to Howard AFB, in the Panama Canal Zone. (Photo credit: Dan Hagedorn Collection)

In order to compensate for the almost permanent shortage of military aviators, the FAS had established an ‘informal’ reserve force, made up of about 20 civilian pilots both men and women who held the honorary rank of captain, had been through the airborne training course and, at least theoretically, could be activated immediately if called upon. As for its mechanics, the FAS was losing an alarming number of them because, after attending technical training sponsored by the Military Aid Program in the US or the Panama Canal Zone, they became a marketable commodity and promptly left the service for civilian jobs. The remaining mechanics were undergoing on-the-job training with the Guatemalan Air Force, and for this, the contingent was flown to Guatemala City on a C-47 transport each morning, where they were placed on the flight line to help their local counterparts, being ferried back home at the end of the working day. Under those circumstances, one cannot help but wonder how in the world the Salvadoran military was expecting to wage a war successfully with such an ill-equipped and poorly manned air force. Air power alone cannot win wars, obviously, but it certainly prevents losing them.

Wreckage of the Trans Florida Aviation F-51D Mustang II, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-402. This airplane crashed straight after taking off from Ilopango, on 8 October 1968. Both the pilot in command, Major Oscar Nelson Bolaños Estrada, and his observer, Lieutenant Leonel Lovo Pérez, were taken to hospital with serious injuries. (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gráfica,* via Marco Lavagnino)

During their conversion at Trans Florida Aviation, a small seat was installed in the back of the cockpit of the Mustang IIs, where a passenger (or observer) could ride, albeit not so comfortably. (Photo credit: Trans Florida Aviation, via Marco Lavagnino)

In January 1969, the Salvadoran Ministry of Defence initiated the second phase of the invasion plan, which consisted of the creation of the legal framework for supporting the war, including the declaration of a national state of emergency and the militarization of public and health services. The

Army, for its part, reorganised its military zones and established the *Teatros de Operaciones* – TOs (Theatres of Operations) or fronts from where the initial offensive was to be launched. The plan called for the creation of four such TOs,[5] the first being the *Teatro de Operaciones Norte* – TON (Theatre of Operations North), based at the town of San Ignacio in the Chalatenango department, under the command of Colonel Mario de Jesús Velásquez. Operating from this front would be the 1st and 8th Infantry Battalions, plus the *'Tigres del Norte'* (Tigers of the North) commando company. The objective of the units assigned to this front would be to capture the town of Nueva Ocotepeque and its airfield, and then launch attacks against Santa Rosa de Copán with the aim of seizing it. Also assigned to the TON but based a few kilometres east, at the town of Las Pilas, would be a battalion of the *Guardia Nacional* under the command of General Alberto Medrano, who would be in charge of preventing the arrival of reinforcements and supplies to Nueva Ocotepeque during the initial thrust of the 1st and 8th Battalions, and then join them for their attack on Santa Rosa de Copán. The second front, called *Teatro de Operaciones Oriental* – TOO (Theatre of Operations East), was commanded by General Guillermo Segundo Martínez and its objective would be to capture the Honduran towns of Aramecina, Langue, Goascorán, El Amatillo and, if possible, Nacaome, and then seal the Inter-American Highway to prevent the arrival of reinforcements from Tegucigalpa. In addition, this force would be responsible for seizing the Honduran islands in the Gulf of Fonseca. For doing this, General Segundo Martínez had been assigned the 4th, 5th, 6th and 11th Infantry Battalions, the Special Forces Company and all the artillery that the *Grupo de Artillería* could muster. The third front, the *Teatro de Operaciones Chalatenango* – TOCH (Theatre of Operations Chalatenango), under the command of Lieutenant Colonel José Fernando Siguí Olivares, would have the mission of supporting the attack that the TON would launch against Nueva Ocotepeque and Santa Rosa de Copán, while occupying as much Honduran territory as possible along the border. The fourth front, named *Teatro de Operaciones Nororiental* – TONO (Theatre of Operations North-east), would also occupy Honduran territory along the border and then support the TOO operations in the Aramecina-Goascorán area.

Trans Florida Aviation F-51D Mustang II, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-405, undergoing repairs at the Madresal Island airstrip, in October 1968. This airplane had sustained damage due to a 'prop strike' while landing. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi, via Dan Hagedorn)

By mid-1969, the Salvadoran Air Force had only five airworthy Goodyear FG-1Ds. The rest had been withdrawn from use due to attrition, and many were left to rot at the Ilopango junkyard. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

The implementation of the third and final phase of the invasion plan began in early April, and consisted of moving troops, combat equipment and supplies to the four fronts that had been established along the border. As had happened with the previous stages, this movement was conducted gradually so as not to attract the attention of the Hondurans. For their part, the few FAS pilots available began conducting air-to-air and air-to-ground combat training, using for this a small valley covered by dry lava near the zone known as *'El Jabalí'*, some 25km north-west of Ilopango Airport. The FAS' reserves were also called upon, and its members began training as co-pilots in the C-47s as well as the Cessna U-17As and T-41s.

The remains of Goodyear FG-1D, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-218, still sporting the overall blue paint scheme that the Corsairs had during the early 1960s, at the Ilopango junkyard sometime in July 1969. (Photo credit: Archi Baldocchi)

Meanwhile, in Honduras, the government, under heavy pressure from both the wealthy landowners of the FENAGH and the unions under the CTH, announced that the Agrarian Reform Law of 1962 would finally be implemented. This was to be a balancing act, however, because the *Instituto Nacional Agrario* – INA (National Agrarian Institute) would have to redistribute land among poor peasants to satisfy the demands of the CTH, but without affecting the landowners of the FENAGH and the banana companies. Under these circumstances, the most practical solution that INA Director Rigoberto Sandoval Correa could find was to expropriate the lands that the Salvadorans peasants had occupied in most of the National and Municipal *fincas* (farms). First, nevertheless, the INA needed to know how many and where exactly the Salvadoran peasants were, so officials were sent to conduct

a census across the National fincas.

Spotting the Salvadoran peasants turned out to be easy, mainly because they stood out among the Honduran population due to their general appearance. The majority of them were of *mestizo* descent, that is, of mixed European and Amerindian roots, while most of the Hondurans were *criollo,* or of European descent. Additionally, despite speaking Spanish just like the Hondurans, their own mannerisms betrayed them, and it was easy to tell them apart just by hearing them talk. They also lacked any identification or land ownership papers, because the Honduran government never saw the need to issue them with such documents.

The first 'official' expulsion of Salvadorans from Honduras occurred on 2 June 1969. Unfortunately, the influx of returning families overwhelmed the refugee camps that the Salvadoran Red Cross had established to receive them. (Photo credit: *LaPrensa Gràfica*)

During the survey, the standard procedure followed by the INA officials[6]

was to inform the Salvadoran peasants that the *Instituto* wanted to help them regularize their titles to their land. The officials then asked them how many years they had been in the country, what documents they had, the size of their families and the number of cattle and other animals they had. Days later, the unfortunate peasants received letters from the INA saying that they were among those who could not be beneficiaries of the Agrarian Reform, as they didn't meet the requirements, among them, being Honduran by birth. The letter ended by stating that they had 30 days to vacate the land they were occupying.

On 2 May, after having denied it for weeks, the Honduran government finally admitted publicly that only natural-born Honduran citizens would be taken into account for land redistribution under the Agrarian Reform Law. The same day, the INA Director announced that the *Instituto* would proceed with the expropriation of the lands occupied by the Salvadoran peasants, even if they had cultivated them for many years. A couple of days later, the Director of the Salvadoran *Instituto de Colonización Rural* (Rural Colonization Institute), Jaime Chacón, arrived in Tegucigalpa to enquire about the radical measures that the INA was about to take against the Salvadoran peasants and that surely would be followed by their being expelled from the country. During the meeting with Honduran officials, Chacón was presented with a proposal for relocating some Salvadoran peasants to the Sico y Paulaya Valley on the Caribbean coast, providing that the Salvadoran government could take charge of those who couldn't be relocated. According to Honduran sources, Chacón didn't even consider such a proposal and focused instead in trying to prevent the expulsions of his fellow citizens.

In the end, the Hondurans waived him off with a rather ambiguous official declaration stating that the Agrarian Reform wouldn't affect the Salvadorans. Ironically, the following day, members of the *Mancha Brava* began harassing the Salvadoran peasants[7] across the country, forcing some of them out of the lands they were occupying, and by 28 May, INA officials, supported by police officers and Army troops, set out to expropriate the lands of the Salvadorans living in the Guanchías region, in the Yoro Department. Finally, on 2 June, the first 'official' expulsion took place and more than 500 Salvadoran families had to pack up what little they had and return to El Salvador, while some others sought refuge in Nicaragua.

3

AT LEAST WE HAVE 'THAT'

As incredible as it may seem, the Salvadoran military managed to mobilize its ground forces to the predefined Theatres of Operations virtually unnoticed. It wasn't until 3 June that Honduran travellers returning from El Salvador began reporting the massing of Salvadoran troops at different locations near the border. Honduran immigration officials at the border post of El Poy, in the Ocotepeque department, received the first of these reports. According to witnesses, Salvadoran military convoys were arriving at the town of La Palma, 8km south-east of El Poy, where a large campsite had been set up. The immigration officials didn't waste any time and immediately notified these alarming developments to Captain José Adbenego Bueso, Commander of the Ocotepeque Military Base, who promptly dispatched some troops to the Cayaguanca region to establish observation posts from which they could keep an eye on the Salvadoran town and the roads connecting it with the capital. A couple of hours later, similar reports were received at the 1st Military Zone in Nacaome, where the Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Saravia Chavarría, immediately sent some of his soldiers to the Goascorán-Aramecina region to investigate what was happening. It didn't take long for Lieutenant Colonel Saravia Chavarría's men to discover that the Salvadoran Army was concentrating troops and combat equipment, including artillery, at the towns of San Miguel, San Francisco de Gotera and Santa Rosa de Lima, all located relatively close to the border.[1] Fearing a major military action, both Honduran officers notified the Army's General Staff about the situation that was unfolding in their respective areas.

As the news reached Tegucigalpa, many in the government thought that a Salvadoran military action was materializing and urged López Arellano to act appropriately. However, the president was sceptical about the possibility of a war with El Salvador, his point of view being encouraged by a group of renowned attorneys whom days earlier had been summoned to analyse the

situation. According to these attorneys, the problem still offered the possibility of a solution via diplomatic means. In fact, they were already assisting Dr Tiburcio Carías Castillo, the Honduran Minister of Foreign Affairs, in designing a diplomatic offensive in order to bring the Salvadorans to the negotiation table, with the collaboration of the Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Costa Rican governments. This possibility was not far-fetched, because despite the mobilization that was taking place, there were strong indications that the Salvadoran president was hesitant about going to war and might favour a diplomatic solution.

The incendiary headlines that the Salvadoran newspapers ran after the returnees' arrival set off a nationwide volunteer effort to aid them. Inevitably, the headlines also exacerbated the Salvadorans' nationalism and, shortly after, there were numerous demonstrations against the government and the Army in which the population accused them of being cowards for not taking any action against Honduras. (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gràfica)*

Salvadoran children sleeping at one of the refugee camps that were established by the Red Cross. (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gràfica*)

By then, the first returnees began arriving in El Salvador, all of them needing food, clothing and some kind of shelter. The initial response of the Salvadoran public health services and the local Red Cross was to establish several refugee camps along the border, where they could be received. Sadly, the influx of returning families overwhelmed these camps within hours, bringing forward the possibility of a serious humanitarian crisis. It didn't take long for the local press to pick up the news, rushing out to interview many of the returnees. It was then that the first 'horror stories' about the Honduran authorities' brutal treatment of the expelled emerged. The following day, virtually all the Salvadoran newspapers ran headlines mentioning the abuses committed against the returnees, followed by incendiary calls for action to defend the beloved fatherland from the Hondurans.

The problem was that none of the returning peasants displayed any evidence of the alleged atrocities committed against them. In fact, according to Salvadoran Red Cross Director Baltasar Llort, the peasants arrived exhausted, disoriented and hungry, but not one of them showed signs of having been harmed.[2] When questioned, many of them confided that they had heard about the atrocities, but none had seen any. Moreover, Llort didn't find any victims of brutal treatment amongst the refugee camps or at the hospitals

in San Salvador. Echoing these observations, Thomas P. Anderson adds that while the Hondurans had indeed committed some abuses against the expelled, these were isolated cases and not so widespread as generally believed in El Salvador.[3]

As soon as the Salvadoran team won the last soccer match, violence exploded in Tegucigalpa, where some houses and businesses belonging to Salvadorans were set on fire, and their owners subjected to humiliation and attacks by the mob. (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gráfica*)

However, the 'horror stories' published by the newspapers fell like a bomb among the Salvadoran population and inevitably exacerbated their nationalism. The positive aspect of this was that the incendiary news set off a nationwide volunteer effort to aid the returnees, but it also gave way to numerous demonstrations against the government and the Army, in which the population accused them of being cowards for not taking any action against Honduras. The malcontents even began publicly humiliating some members of the Salvadoran Army officer corps, and the military in general became the butt of many jokes.

Colonel Enrique Soto Cano, Commander of the Honduran Air Force. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

While it may seem that this was the result of the local journalists' lack of professionalism, which was endemic in the region, many historians believe that the press in both countries ran shameless propaganda campaigns orchestrated by those affected by the presence of the Salvadoran peasants, with the aim of destabilizing the governments of López Arellano and Sánchez Hernández. In the case of El Salvador, the elements of society most worried

about the peasants' return were wealthy landowners and right-wing politicians, who feared that the situation could turn into another revolt similar to that which had taken place in 1932. In fact, as soon as the first returnees arrived in the country, they pulled out all of the stops in pressuring President Sánchez Hernández[4] for a quick solution to the problem, even if that meant going to war with Honduras.

It was against this potentially volatile background that the qualifying rounds for the 1970 Jules Rimet soccer World Cup began, with the first match between El Salvador and Honduras taking place in Tegucigalpa on 8 June, in which the team of the host country won. Fortunately, no disturbances occurred beyond harsh remarks published by the newspapers of both countries which, by then, were engaged in an unprecedented war of incendiary headlines. The second match was played in San Salvador on 15 June, and was preceded by hostile acts in which the local fans did their best to harass the Honduran players, initially at their hotel and then while they were heading to the stadium. During the game, members of the *Guardia Civil's* ORDEN organisation, wearing civilian clothes, incited attacks against Honduran fans outside the stadium, sparking brutal street fights, while the National Police looked the other way. When the Salvadoran national team won the match, violence exploded in Tegucigalpa, where some houses and businesses belonging to Salvadorans were set on fire and their owners subjected to humiliation and attacks by the mob. Within hours, the violence spread across Honduras and, in Santa Rosa de Copán, the Salvadoran Consul, Francisco Dheming, was lynched, while in Catacamas, troops led by Colonel Lisandro Padilla rounded up many Salvadorans and forced them out of the country with extreme violence.

The situation between the two countries took a turn for the worse on 18 June, when the INA, continuing with the Agrarian Reform, began the second-largest expulsion of Salvadoran peasants, something that was chronicled quite enthusiastically by the Honduran press by publishing notes cheering the 'cleansing' of the different areas from where the Salvadorans were being expelled. The following day, 19 June, besides formally protesting at the expulsions and the generalized violence against the Salvadorans in Honduras, President Sánchez Hernández formally requested the involvement of the OAS' Human Rights Subcommittee to conduct a thorough investigation of the grave incidents that were taking place. Whether this was a manoeuvre for buying time or a sincere attempt to settle the problem on the part of the

Salvadoran government is anyone's guess, but the Hondurans agreed to the subcommittee's involvement. Shortly after, the Honduran government finally launched its own diplomatic offensive by creating a mediation commission comprising the foreign ministers of Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala, under the auspices of the US Embassy in Honduras.

A beautiful shot depicting a pair of Vought F4U-5Ns of the Honduran Air Force. By mid-1969, the Honduran air arm had six of these fighters, as well as five F4U-4s. (Photo credit: Col. José Navarro, via the Honduran Air Museum)

A North American T-28A of the Honduran Air Force, photographed while on final approach to Toncontín. The Honduran air arm had five of these trainers when the war began. At least two of them, carrying .50 cal machine-gun pods, flew offensive missions during the conflict. (Photo credit: Carlos Planas, via Dan Hagedorn)

Incredibly, the diplomatic machinery that both governments set in motion came close to averting war during the following week, as López Arellano and Sánchez Hernández tried to settle the problem through numerous phone calls. These efforts came to naught, however, when the chaotic situation prevailing in both countries began narrowing the chances for negotiation. In the case of Honduras, the government was facing wave after wave of strikes organised by the unions under the CTH, strikes that had originated at the banana plantations on the northern coast in 1968, and had spread to San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa despite the brutal repression campaign unleashed by the authorities. By the time that the negotiations between the two presidents were taking place, it was the School Teachers Union that went out on the streets,[5] followed by a couple of student organisations, in a strike that would last until the beginning of the hostilities.

The entire fighter-bomber Squadron of the Honduran Air Force can be seen in this excellent photo, taken at Toncontín in 1969. The second airplane from the right has the 'Cantarranas' nickname painted on the cowling. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum Collection)

Douglas C-47, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-301, photographed at Nueva Ocotepeque. The Honduran Air arm had five of these rugged transports by the time the war began. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum Collection)

The Honduran Air Force also operated the versatile Cessna U-17. By mid-1969, three of them were in service, and during the war they took part in dangerous flights and patrol missions. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum Collection)

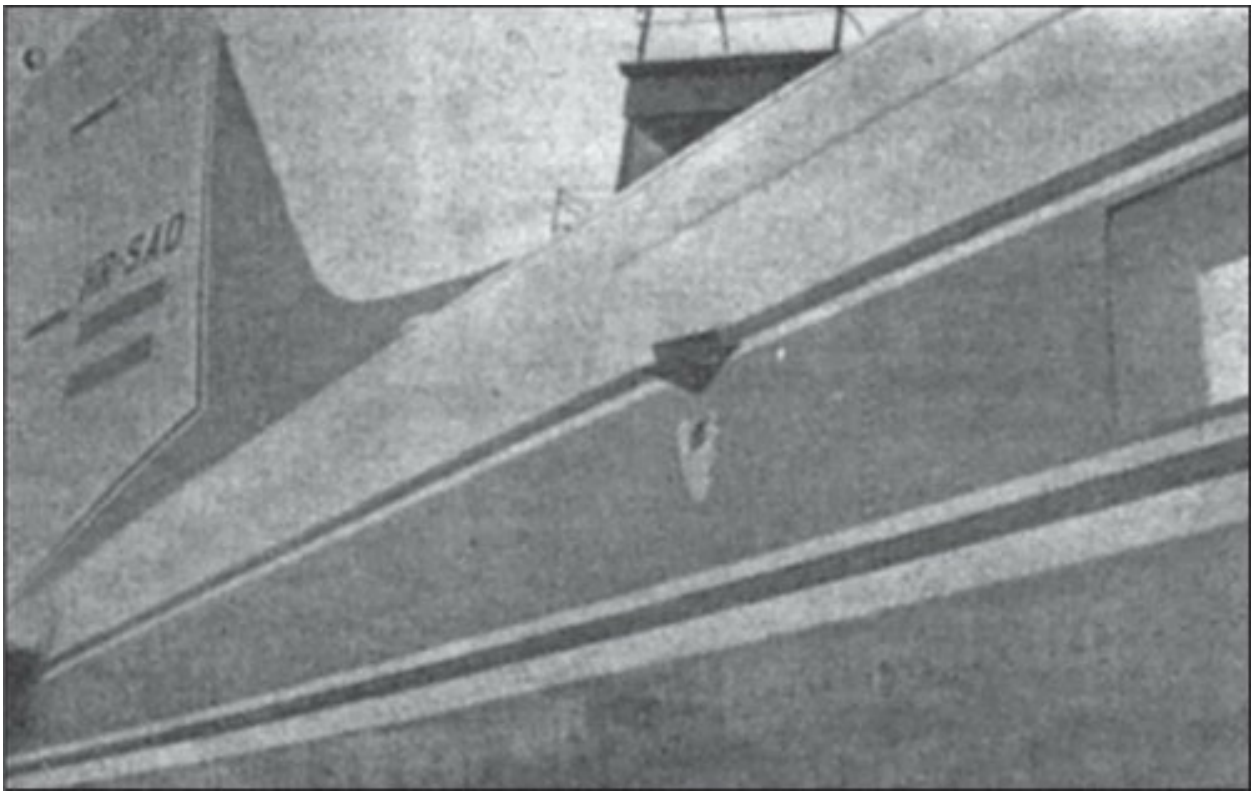
By mid-1969, the Honduran Air Force had two North American SNJ-4s and four T-6G trainers in service. Two of them, bearing machine guns, participated in 'offensive' missions during the war. (Photo credit: LTC Bassett, via Dan Hagedorn)

Further complicating the Honduran political scene, there were influential sectors of the country accusing President López Arellano of corruption and nepotism, especially after the mayoral elections of March 1968, which the government allegedly rigged. Not to be outdone by the CTH, these sectors were organising their own protests, clamouring for a return to democracy. It is because of these circumstances that many Salvadoran historians have claimed repeatedly over the years that López Arellano used the war to deflect attention from his country's internal crisis. The reality was much simpler, however, because even though the Honduran president avoided war until the last moment, he did use the expulsion of the Salvadorans to divert the attention of the population from his government's mismanagement and corruption, and he apparently did this without completely understanding the consequences that such action could bring.

In El Salvador, the situation was no less complicated. By then, President Sánchez Hernández had been cornered by the wealthy landowners and most of the right-leaning political parties, who, in public, stated that they supported the president in whatever action was necessary to defend the country. In

private, however, they were threatening him with a coup if he didn't go to war in order to force the Hondurans to stop the expulsions. In fact, such was the pressure that these groups exerted upon the president that, by 26 June, he abandoned his conciliatory discourse and stopped communicating with López Arellano. Shortly after, the Salvadoran government formally accused Honduras of genocide at the Interamerican Human Rights Commission. On the same day, and following a wise decision of the World Cup's organisers in order to avoid any confrontations between the fans of both nations, the defining qualifying game took place in Mexico City, which the Salvadoran national team won. The match had not even ended when the mob was again running rampant in Honduras, attacking Salvadoran houses and businesses, leaving several people injured and the Salvadoran Consul in Tela killed. In the evening, the Salvadoran government notified its Honduran counterpart that they were officially breaking diplomatic relations and requesting that the OAS conduct a thorough investigation of the attacks and violent expulsions of the Salvadorans in Honduras. The following day, 27 June, President López Arellano once again met with the group of renowned attorneys to analyse the latest developments. Surprisingly, they assured him that a war with El Salvador was 'impossible' and that he should rely on diplomatic efforts for settling the problem. Accordingly, the president dispatched envoys to the OAS headquarters in Washington DC in order to secure international support, while the foreign ministers of Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica made public a letter addressed to the Salvadoran president in which they requested the withdrawal of troops from the border and encouraged him to seek a negotiated solution. On the other hand, López Arellano was worried that a 'fifth column' could be organised by the Salvadorans still living in the country, which could cause serious problems if they decided to retaliate to the expulsions. Hence, the president ordered the formation of 'Civic Committees'[6] across the country, to support the authorities in exerting tight control upon the Salvadorans and carry out a disarmament campaign on the civilian population. However, it didn't take long for these actions to degenerate into even more aggressions against the Salvadorans in Honduras.

Aerial view of the Honduran Air Force headquarters at Toncontín Airport in Tegucigalpa.
(Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum Collection)



A Douglas C-47-DL, Honduran civil registration HR-SAD, operated by the national airline SAHSA, was hit by Salvadoran anti-aircraft artillery fire while climbing for altitude after taking off from the Nueva Ocotepeque airfield on 3 July 1969. In this photograph, the damage sustained by the transport can be seen. (Photo credit: El Diario de Hoy, via Amado Aguiluz):

On 2 July, the Salvadoran government finally crossed the threshold and began preparing to launch the invasion. The first action taken was to set up an advance air operation aimed at gathering last-minute mapping and intelligence information on key Honduran military positions. For that purpose, a Cessna 310L believed to have been marked YS-02-N (MSN 0200, ex-N3350Q), belonging to the *Instituto Geográfico Nacional* (National Geographic Institute), as well as several civilian airplanes piloted by military and reserve crews, began flying reconnaissance missions over different areas of Honduras, but especially over Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and the border areas near the Gulf of Fonseca and Ocotepeque. Then, in an amply-publicised event, President Sánchez Hernández ordered the mobilization of the *Guardia Nacional* towards the northern border. In Tegucigalpa, news of the Salvadoran mobilization sent shockwaves through the Honduran armed forces as it had caught them ill-prepared and woefully undermanned.[7] In a meeting with President López Arellano to assess the status of the Army, the

high command revealed that there were only 3,500 troops distributed in six Infantry Battalions, these being equipped with M2 carbines and the older M1 Garand rifles, plus an undetermined number of Madsen light machine guns. For its part, the *Batallón de Artillería* (Artillery Battalion) had just a handful of M20 75mm recoilless rifles and 81mm mortars, and, in contrast with the Salvadoran Army, no tanks or armoured vehicles were available. To make things even worse, it became evident that corruption and mismanagement was running rampant through the armed forces. There were many Army officers who were making money by padding the payroll in the different military zones, and because of this, most of the infantry battalions couldn't be considered combat-capable due to lack of personnel. In addition, some of these units were committed to non-military tasks such as road paving and housing construction. In fact, of the six battalions, only one of them was more or less equipped and manned, and had been conducting combat training thanks mainly to the US Military Aid Program's support.[8] Under those difficult circumstances, López Arellano decided to use the 'Civic Committees' to augment the force.

SAHSA's Douglas C-47-DL, Honduran civil registration HR-SAD, photographed sometime in 1969 at Golosón Airport, Honduras. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

To everyone's surprise, when the president asked the FAH's Commander, Colonel Enrique Soto Cano, about the status of the air arm, he promptly answered that they already had defensive plans in place and that all the

squadrons were more or less operational.[9] At the time, its order of battle listed six Vought F4U-5N and five F4U-4 Corsair fighter-bombers, five Douglas C-47 transports, a Douglas C-54 medium transport, a Beech C-45 light transport, three Cessna 185B (U-17A and U-17C) light utility airplanes, five North American T-28A Trojan armed trainers and six North American AT-6 Texans, also capable of carrying armament. These aircraft were organised into a *Grupo de Combate* (Combat Group) composed of three squadrons, namely the *Escuadrón de Caza-Bombardeo* (Fighter-Bomber Squadron) equipped with the Corsairs, the *Escuadrón de Transporte* (Transport Squadron) equipped with the C-47s, the C-45 and C-54, and the *Escuadrón de Reconocimiento* (Reconnaissance Squadron) that had assigned the Trojans, the Texans and the Cessna 185Bs. Due to the lack of maintenance facilities, almost the entire FAH strength was based at the air arm's headquarters located at Toncontín International Airport in Tegucigalpa. However, three or four Corsairs were deployed periodically to the La Mesa airfield, in San Pedro Sula, for border and coastal patrol duties as well as combat training. As regards personnel, the FAH had 20 pilots and a well-established in-country flight training programme. In addition, there were 730 men assigned to the maintenance, armament, security and base services elements. In contrast with its Salvadoran counterpart, the FAH had achieved a certain degree of operational efficiency and had the opportunity to display its abilities not only during the previous combat exercises organised by SOUTHCOM, but also on two occasions during the year preceding the war, when it had deployed almost its entire combat capability to the airfield of La Ceiba after reports of suspected guerrilla infiltration there, and, later, to Puerto Lempira for conducting coastal patrol missions. The transport element of the FAH had enough capacity to deploy important units of ground forces and to successfully resupply those contingents when necessary.

The Salvadoran Air Force used its Cessna U-17s as attack planes during the war. In such capacity, the airplanes were flown with their left-hand side doors removed, so 60mm and 81mm mortar rounds - strapped to the seat – could be lobbed out by the pilot while banking steeply. (Photo credit: Fred Young, via Dan Hagedorn)

In order to justify the sorry state of the Army in comparison with the FAH's surprising operational readiness prior to the war, many Honduran historians claim that since 1935, the Honduran armed forces had based the national defence doctrine on the effective use of airpower, mainly due to the country's topography, while the Army had been relegated to an auxiliary role. This couldn't be farther from the truth, though, and the only reason that the crisis found the FAH ready for battle was due to the perseverance and vision of Colonel Soto Cano and his men, who constantly had to overcome the Defence Ministry's indifference and disdain. Obtaining even the most insignificant spare part or just enough funds to keep the crews flying was an exercise in patience that required a great deal of bureaucratic in-fighting. As in the case of the Salvadoran air arm, this was a direct result of the FAH being completely subordinated from the Army's high command, where infantry officers who couldn't grasp the concept of airpower made the decisions.

Among the 'volunteered' civilian airplanes requisitioned by the Salvadoran Air Force just before the war was this beautifully restored North American P-51D Mustang, Salvadoran registration YS-210P, owned by Archie Baldocchi. Baldocchi was later appointed as extraordinary assistant to the Air Force Commander. (Photo credit: Brian Baker, via Gary Kuhn)

Ironically, it was the FAH which became the first to respond when things began turning ugly. Near midday on 3 July, a Douglas C-47-DL, Honduran civil registration HR-SAD (MSN 4477, ex-USAAF 4118415) operated by the national airline SAHSA, was hit by Salvadoran anti-aircraft artillery fire while climbing for altitude after taking off from the Nueva Ocotepeque airfield, 8km from the border with El Salvador. Fortunately, the passenger-packed transport was able to flee the area safely and no one was harmed. During the flight towards Tegucigalpa, the pilot of HR-SAD, Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez, reported the incident to the FAH, and immediately a pair of armed North American T-28s were scrambled from Toncontín to determine the source of this attack. Upon arrival, less than 30 minutes later, the T-28s were received with heavy anti-aircraft fire from Salvadoran positions across the border. Following strict orders from the FAH Commander, the Honduran pilots did not return fire and limited themselves to marking the positions of the Salvadoran machine-gun emplacements on their maps before heading back to base. The episode was far from over, however, because during the flight back to Toncontín, the T-28s were

notified of an unidentified airplane flying over an area between the towns of Gualcinse and Candelaria, also close to the Salvadoran border. Within minutes, the two T-28s were able to intercept the offending airplane,[11] which turned out to be a Piper PA-28-235B Cherokee, identified with the Salvadoran civilian registration YS-234P, conducting a photo-reconnaissance mission. As soon as the T-28s intercepted the Cherokee, it was ordered to land immediately at the closest airfield, but the Salvadoran pilot, a civilian named Eduardo Llach Hill, refused to obey and escaped towards El Salvador at high speed. Following the FAH Commander's orders, the T-28s' pilots, Colonel José Serra and 2nd Lieutenant Roberto Mendoza, didn't go after the Cherokee, only ensuring that it had left Honduran airspace before heading back to Toncontín.

Amidst the mounting war of nerves and the mutual accusations of attacks on border posts and violations of the air space of both nations, the Honduran government requested the OAS to organise a consulting body that could analyse the many violations of the Rio Treaty that El Salvador was committing. Accordingly, the OAS met on 4 July to further determine what steps should be taken to solve the crisis, but nothing solid came of it. Instead, the OAS decided to 'fully support' the negotiations that the Foreign Ministers of Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua were carrying out. On the same day, a commission of the OAS' Human Rights Subcommittee arrived in San Salvador to begin its own investigation.

By then, the FAS was already conducting tactical manoeuvres, beginning with preparation of the runways located at Madresal Island, San Miguel, Santa Ana, San Andrés and Usulután, which were to be used as dispersion airfields. Shortly after, all the Salvadoran civilian pilots were called upon to join the Air Force in order to supplement the lack of military aircrews. At the strategic level, the FAS Commander, Major Henríquez, was trying to get authorization from the Army's high command to launch a pre-emptive bombing strike aimed at destroying FAH aircraft on the ground in order to achieve air superiority as quickly as possible, but the infantry mindset at the high command prevailed, and instead of allowing him to bomb the FAH airbases, he was ordered to plan a 'massive' air attack on military facilities where, according to the available intelligence, the Honduran troops would probably concentrate once the invasion had started. According to the Salvadoran ground commanders, such action would clear the path to their targets of any potential opposition. What no one at the high command

understood was that the FAS, in its current circumstances, would not be capable to accomplish such a task, mainly due to the sorry state of its aircraft. Even the recently acquired Mustang IIs showed some signs of mishandling and attrition, and not all of them had their reflex gun-sights working, while some others lacked armour plates in the cockpit to protect the pilot. The situation with the older FG-1D Corsairs was even worse; they had turned into maintenance nightmares, and keeping them on the flight line was a testimonial to the Salvadoran line ground crews' perseverance. During the following days, Major Henríquez tried to talk the high command out of the idea of launching the massive air attack against several targets with low strategic value, but time and again he encountered a wall of indifference. When the Salvadoran high command established 14 July as D-Day for the invasion, Major Henríquez once again suggested bombing Toncontín and San Pedro Sula airport, where the FAH kept a small detachment. But once again the infantry officers dismissed him, with the only difference that Toncontín was added to the list of targets that they wanted attacked. When the FAS Commander said that launching the massive attack would be impossible with the aircraft available, he was ordered to use whatever aircraft he could for the mission, even civilian airplanes and military transports.

Baldocchi's Mustang had to be 're-militarized' as soon as it was incorporated into the Salvadoran Air Force's fighter squadron. In this photograph, taken in July 1969, the aircraft's

machine guns are being loaded. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

By 8 July, Major Henríquez had managed to requisition 14 civilian aircraft, mostly light Cessna and Piper types, which the FAS mechanics began readying for combat, mainly by removing their left-hand side doors so 60mm and 81mm mortar rounds – strapped to the seat – could be lobbed out by the pilot while banking steeply.[12] In the case of the Pipers, sections of the cabin floor were removed to allow the dropping of the mortar rounds by a member of the crew. Simultaneously, the venerable C-47s in the FAS transport element were being converted into 'bombers' by installing railings on their cargo hold floors, to facilitate the dropping of bombs through their side doors. It is worth noting here that among the 'volunteered' civilian airplanes, was a beautifully restored North American P-51D Mustang, Salvadoran registration YS-210P[13] (ex-USAAF 44-73350), owned by a US citizen named Archie Baldocchi, who was married to a wealthy Salvadoran lady and had been living in the country for many years. Baldocchi, a renowned 'warbird' restorer and trader, was appointed as extraordinary assistant to the FAS Commander, and in such capacity, he oversaw the modifications of the civilian airplanes, including his own Mustang, which had to be 're-militarized'. Baldocchi's airplane was immediately pressed into service by the FAS, being assigned the serial FAS-402, which originally belonged to the Mustang II that crashed in October 1968. The next day, 9 July, the Salvadoran high command officially notified Major Henríquez that the initial action of the campaign would be the air attack, which would be followed by the troops crossing into Honduras. This time, the FAS Commander didn't even fight the decision and ordered his pilots to start practicing bombing runs and study all the intelligence available on the selected targets.

It was about this time that the diplomatic efforts began crashing down. On the one hand, the OAS was still hesitant about getting involved in what was already considered a mess, and in a meeting on 10 July, its members reaffirmed their support for the Central American foreign ministers' initiative. The next day, the commission of the Human Rights Subcommittee arrived in Guatemala City after having visited Honduras as part of its investigation, and made public a report detailing its findings and recommendations. To no one's surprise, the document renewed the subcommittee's pleas for a peaceful solution, encouraged the Salvadorans to withdraw their troops from the border and cautioned the press of both

countries about their confrontational discourse. Then, near midnight, the Nicaraguan President, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who had been coordinating the Central American foreign ministers' efforts, phoned López Arellano and told him that the negotiations had failed and that a Salvadoran military escalation was now imminent. Only then did the Honduran president make the decision of mobilize the Army and commence its movements towards the border area. Hence, during the early hours of 12 July, the Honduran Army's General Staff moved to *Casa Presidencial* (the Presidential Residence) and the FAH's C-47s began airlifting troops, supplies and ammunition to the two operational theatres that the Army's high command established, these being the *Teatro de Operaciones Sur* – TOS (Southern Operations Theatre) with its headquarters at Nacaome, under the command of Colonel Policarpo Paiz García, and the *Teatro de Operaciones Sur-Occidental* – TOSO (South-Western Operations Theatre) with its headquarters at Nueva Ocotepeque, commanded by Colonel Arnaldo Alvarado Dubón. For its part, the FAH was put on maximum alert and deployed a group of airplanes to La Mesa Airport, in San Pedro Sula, where the *Comando Aéreo del Norte* (Northern Air Command) was established, its commander being Colonel Mario Chichilla Cárcamo. This action was prudent, and viewed as a tactical dispersion of forces so as to not leave Toncontín Airport completely vulnerable. Also, from that day onwards, the FAH's F4Us and T-28s began conducting periodic patrol flights along the border with El Salvador, and over Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. With these actions, the stage was finally set for what would be a short but intense confrontation.

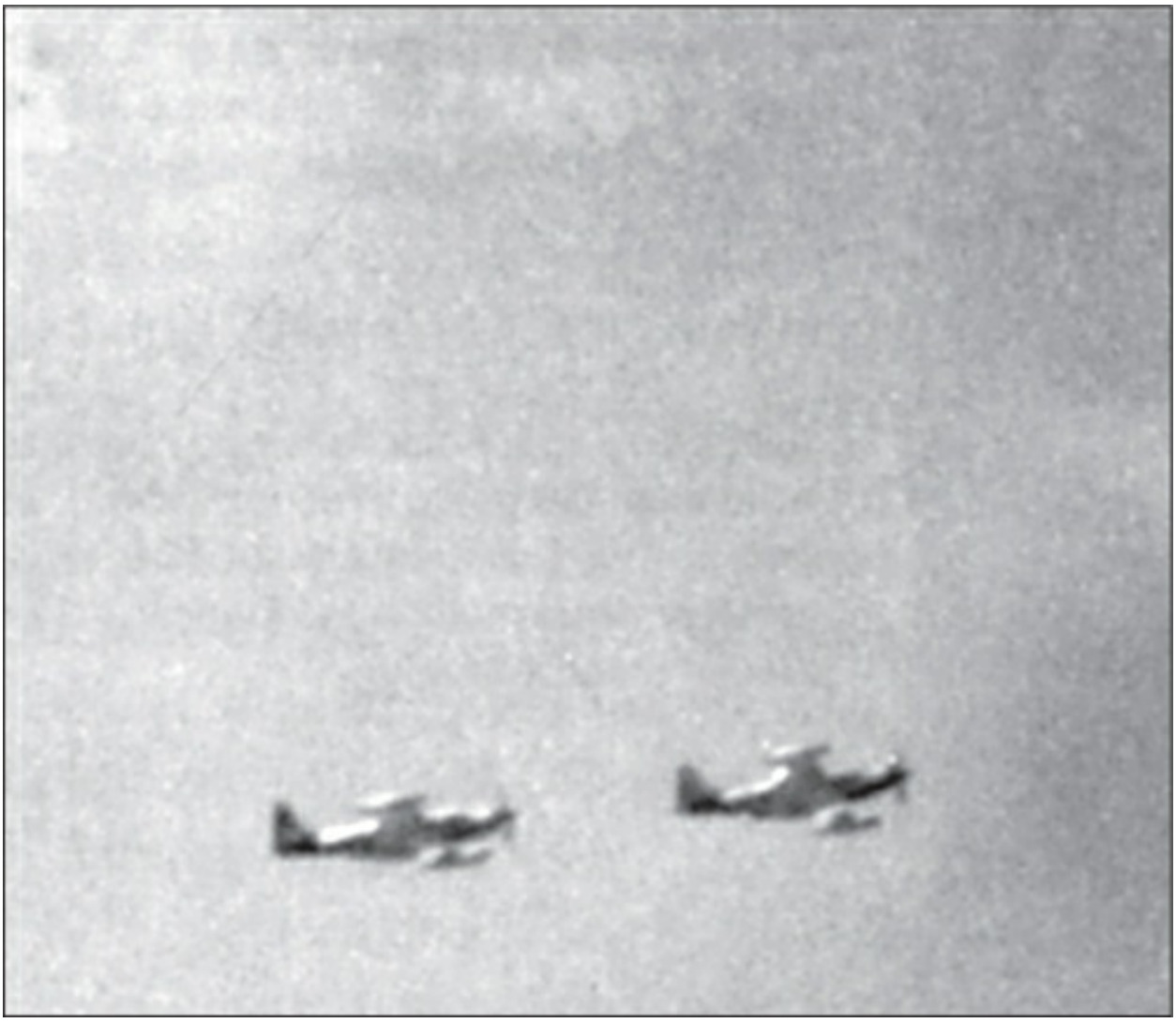
4

A 'MASSIVE' AIRSTRIKE

On Monday, 14 July, the break of dawn found FAS mechanics totally immersed in preparing the aircraft that would conduct the airstrike against key targets in Honduras, which would also signal the beginning of the invasion. One group was loading the Mustang IIs and FG-1Ds with the only ordnance that the FAS had at the time, namely Second World War-vintage AN-M30 100lb general-purpose bombs. In both cases, the fighters would be carrying six of these – three under each wing with the FG-1Ds carrying *four* hanging from locally-made bomb racks adapted to the rocket launchers' pylons. The C-47s were being loaded with 18 bombs each, which, as already mentioned, would be rolled out of the cargo door by two members of the crew. Not far from there, another group of mechanics was finishing loading the mortar rounds onto the civilian Cessnas and Pipers that had been requisitioned days earlier, and making sure that these airplanes were ready for take-off. Meanwhile, inside one of the hangars, a third group was trying desperately to finish the re-militarization of Baldocchi's Mustang, a process that so far had included the installation of a locally built reflex gun-sight, two bomb racks and two .50 cal AN/M2 Browning machine guns in each wing, besides a hastily applied camouflage scheme. In the end, and despite the mechanics' best efforts, the work on this airplane couldn't be completed on time and it missed the opportunity to fly during the very first combat mission of the war.

At the Officers' Club, located opposite the military ramp of Ilopango Airport, the FAS pilots and their civilian counterparts had already started their third day of rigorous isolation. For the last 72 hours, they had been studying the available intelligence on their assigned targets, as well as the ingress and egress routes they would be flying during the air strike. By then, the Army's high command had decided to follow Major Henríquez's suggestion about hitting Toncontín and La Mesa at least once in order to destroy the FAH's aircraft on the ground. Thus, a C-47 and a pair of Mustang IIs had been assigned to bomb the Honduran capital's airport, while La Mesa

would be attacked by a flight of three FG-1Ds. For their part, the civilian Cessnas and Pipers would be attacking Honduran defensive positions at El Amatillo and Nueva Ocotepeque. It is worth noting here that, with the exception of the transport pilots, the majority of these aviators had little or no experience in air navigation, much less in long-distance flights. Thus, the aspect of the mission they were preoccupied with was precisely finding their way towards their targets and then returning safely to their dispersal airfields amidst a complete blackout of the country's air navigation aids. As has been mentioned, the decision to disperse the aircraft and shut down navigation aids after the air strike had been made by the FAS leadership in order to protect the aircraft in case Ilopango was bombed, and to make it more difficult for Honduran pilots to carry out such an attack. Even the FAS command, control and communications elements had been ordered out of Ilopango, and by mid-morning, a rudimentary command post had been established at the top of a small hill in Soyapango, less than 2km north-west of the airport.

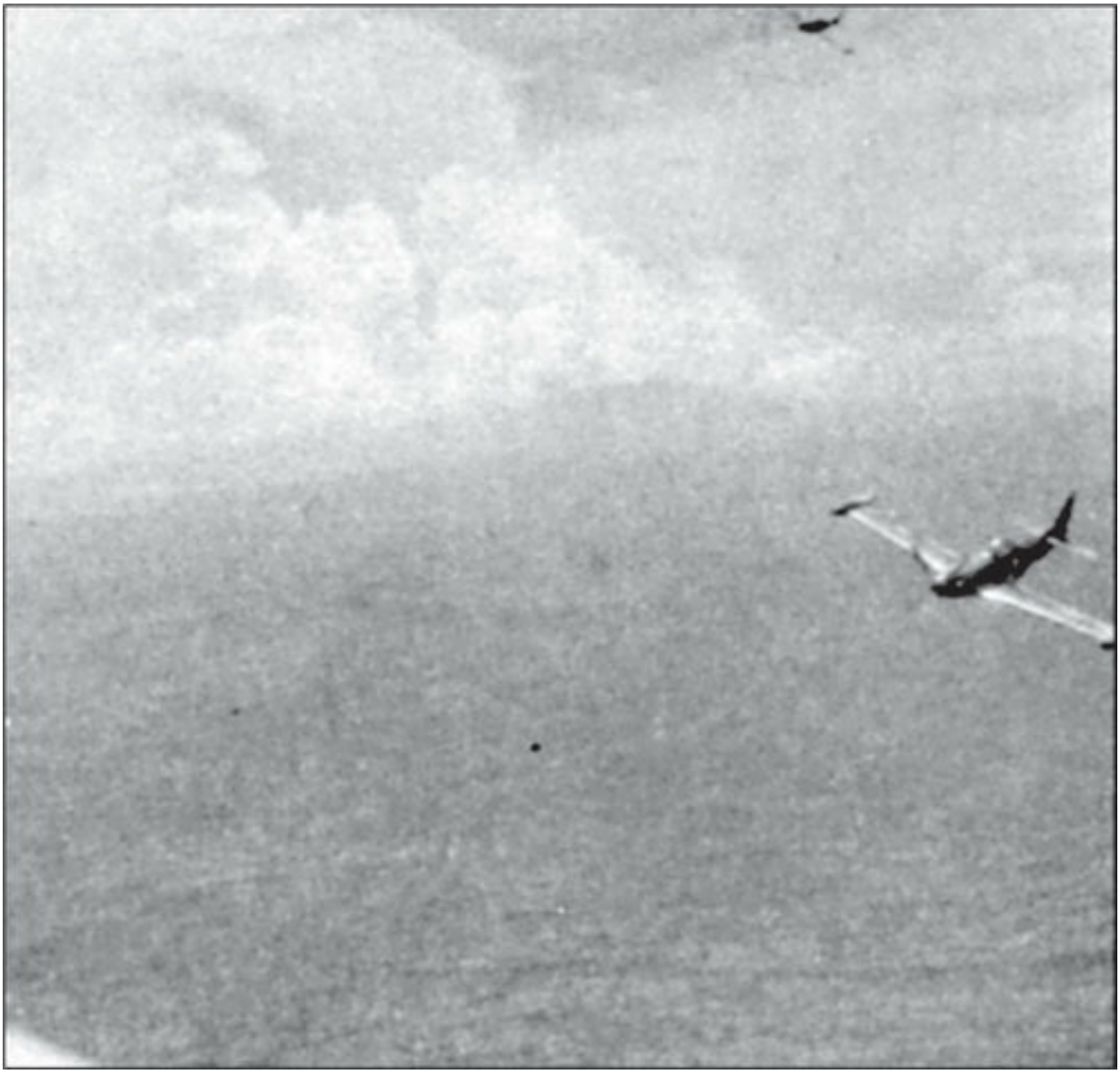


A pair of Salvadoran Mustang IIs practicing interceptions, somewhere over El Salvador, a couple of days before the war's outbreak. (Photo credit: Vicente Barraza, via Douglas Cornejo)

Near 3:00 p.m., the pilots were ordered to proceed to the operations briefing room for a last-minute check of the mission’s details and weather reports. At this point, it seemed that the flights attacking Toncontín and La Mesa would have it easy, as the visibility and weather conditions over both areas were good. In contrast, El Amatillo and Nueva Ocotepeque were covered in low clouds and moderate rain, meaning that the civilian and the few military pilots flying the Cessnas and Pipers faced a rather complicated task.

During the following two hours, the crews were ordered to scramble on two separate occasions, only to be recalled at the last minute. Ultimately, the

Army's high command made the decision to launch the aircraft just after sunset so they could attack their targets while there was still enough daylight, and be able to escape under the cover of darkness after completing their mission. The invasion's H-Hour was thus set for 6:10 p.m., when the first aircraft would be dropping their bombs over the pre-selected Honduran targets.



Another view of the Salvadoran Mustang IIs conducting an interception practice. (Photo credit: Vicente Barraza, via Douglas Cornejo)

This Salvadoran Douglas C-47, serialled FAS-104, attacked Toncontín Airport with 100lb bombs during the first offensive mission of the war. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

At 4:00 p.m., the crews were sent to perform pre-flight checks on their aircraft, and half an hour later, Major Henríquez arrived at the alert apron, where aircraft on alert duty were parked, and gave a short speech to his pilots before waving them off. The first to depart were the slower Cessnas and Pipers, packed full of mortar rounds, followed 10 minutes later by a C-47 transport. Then it was the turn of three Mustang IIs and the three FG-1Ds. By 5:50 p.m., 31 Salvadoran aircraft were on their way to their assigned targets.

Near 6:00 p.m., one of the much-criticized episodes of the war began when the TF-51D serialled FAS-400, piloted by Captain Benjamin Trabanino Santos, departed Ilopango and instead of joining the combat formation, headed towards Guatemala City, landing at La Aurora airport less than an hour later. Once on the ground, both the pilot and his airplane were interned by the Guatemalan authorities in accordance with international law. For many years, this strange incident was labelled as a cowardly act on the part of Captain Trabanino, who, allegedly, had been ordered to attack the military post at Santa Rosa de Copán. However, it wasn't until a couple of years later that it became known that Trabanino had been ordered to ferry his airplane to Guatemala as a safety measure, since it was the only dualcontrol Mustang the FAS had on hand at the time. Major Henríquez had made the decision, even at the expense of leaving the air arm a pilot and an airplane short at the worst

possible time. For the record, the pilot and the airplane returned to El Salvador once the ceasefire had been established.

The Mustang, serialled FAS-400, was flown to Guatemala City on 14 July, where it spent the rest of the war. The Salvadoran Air Force commander made this decision in order to protect the only dual-control Mustang the FAS had at the time. (Photo credit: Douglas Cornejo Collection)

Near 6:20 p.m., the Honduran Army's high command at *Casa Presidencial* received the first indications that the Salvadoran assault had begun. Several reports sent from El Poy and El Amatillo border posts said that they were under heavy artillery and machine-gun fire attack.[1] Minutes later, more alarming reports began pouring in, this time of air attacks at Nacaome, Choluteca and Amapala, the latter on El Tigre Island. To everyone's surprise, it was the pilots flying the Cessnas and Pipers who had managed to beat the complicated weather conditions over the Goascorán-Aramecina area and were attacking their assigned targets. Another group, also flying civilian aircraft, had reached their assigned targets at Nueva Ocotepeque and Santa Rosa de Copán, and were attacking them too. However, due to the type of ordnance the airplanes were carrying, these air strikes were causing more noise than damage.

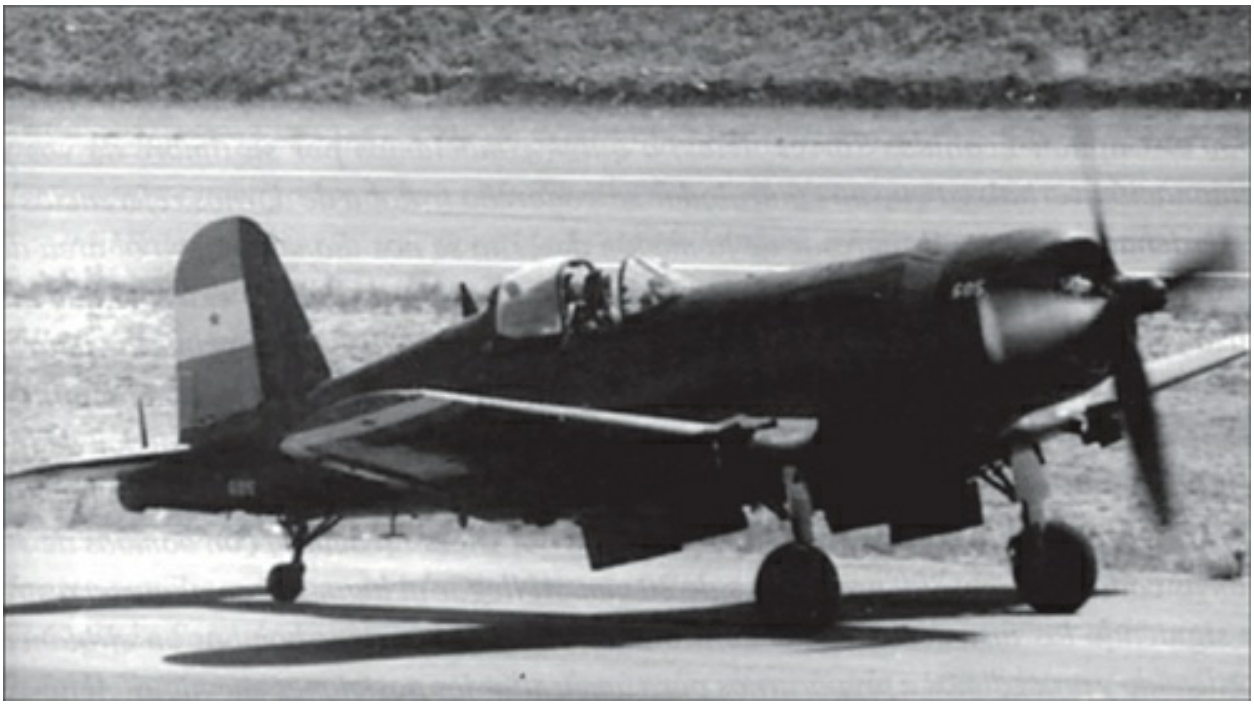
Around the same time, the C-47 serialled FAS-104, flown by Majors Jorge Domínguez and Fidel Fernández, supported by Sergeants Miguel Tónchez and Miguel Jiménez, arrived over Tegucigalpa, and immediately established a circular pattern over Toncontín Airport at 8,000ft. Within seconds, one of the sergeants began sliding the AN-M30 bombs[2] along the railing fixed to the floor of the airplane towards the cargo door, while the other pushed them out. Inevitably, when the first bombs exploded on the ground, the lights in Tegucigalpa went out, leaving Major Domínguez without a much-needed visual reference. Shortly after, a .50 cal machine gun emplaced on the outskirts of Toncontín Airport opened fire, trying to shoot down the C-47. Luckily for the Salvadoran crew, the gunner was having a hard time trying to locate the improvised bomber, and upon running out of ordnance, the C-47 climbed away from the area and headed back to El Salvador.

As incredible as it may seem, the only attack missions on 14 July that could be considered successful were those flown by the Salvadoran civilian pilots. In this photograph, a group of them can be seen after having finished the paratrooper's course in 1968. (Photo credit: Salvadoran Aviation Museum)

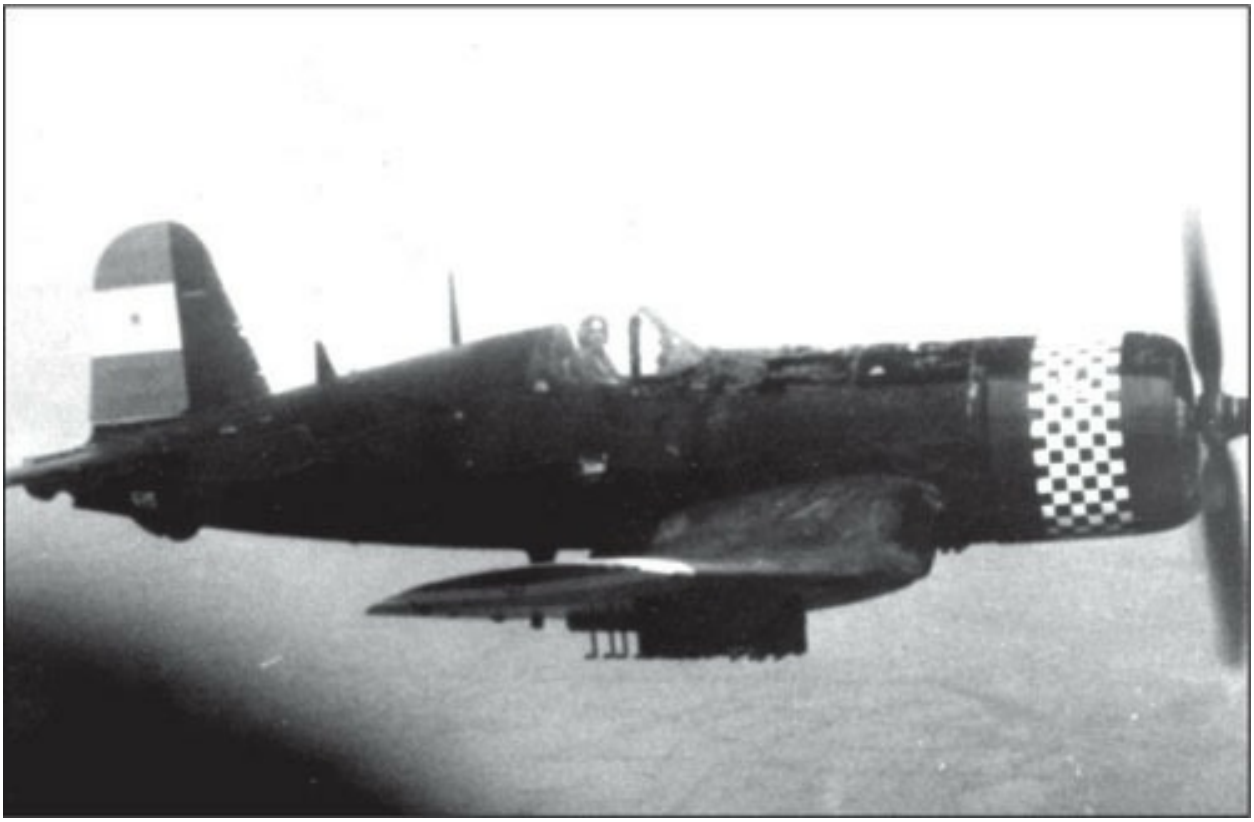
After the initial attack on Toncontín, four F4U-5Ns of the Honduran Air Force were scrambled in order to intercept the enemy airplanes. These were flown by Lieutenant Colonel José Serra, Major Oscar Colíndres and Captains Fernando Soto and Francisco Zepeda. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Just days before the war's outbreak, the Honduran Air Force deployed its five F4U-4s to La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula. In this photograph, at least four of them can be seen taxiing after returning from a combat mission. (Photo: Honduran Air Museum)

After the bombing of Toncontín, things began going downhill for the FAS pilots. Two Mustang IIs that had been assigned to escort FAS-104 and also attack the Honduran airport, failed to rendezvous with the transport and, for reasons that have never been established, didn't make it to Tegucigalpa.[3] It has been assumed that both aircraft got lost along the way and were the ones that bombed the small towns of Jalteva, El Suyatal, Guaimaca and Catacamas, none of which had any tactical or strategic value, before returning to their base.



Vought F4U-5N, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-605, taking off from Toncontín during the war. (Photo credit: Mario Lavagnino, via the Honduran Air Museum)



A beautiful in-flight study of a Vought F4U-4, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-615. During the

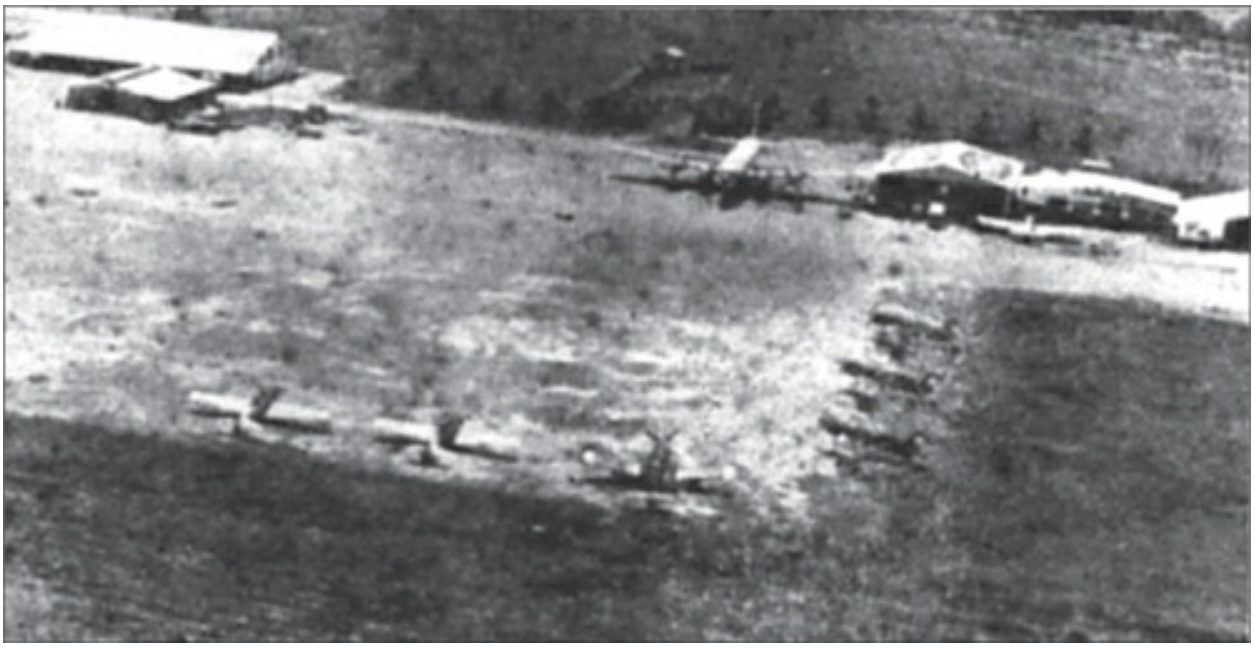
war, the Honduran F4U-4s were based at La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula. (Photo credit: Col. Lázaro Urbina, via the Honduran Air Museum)

La Mesa, San Pedro Sula's airfield, was also spared from being bombed because the three FG-1Ds failed to arrive over the target.[4] As in the case of the Mustang IIs that were assigned to attack Toncontín, it seems that these pilots got lost along the way and opted to drop their bombs near the town of Santa Rosa de Copán before returning to El Salvador. At La Mesa, four Honduran F4U-4s, piloted by Captains Carlos Aguirre and Walter López, and Lieutenants Edgardo Mejia and Marco Tulio Rivera, were scrambled to intercept the approaching Salvadoran Corsairs, but despite flying as far as Nueva Ocotepeque, Santa Rosa de Copán and Cañaveral, they failed to find them.

Even though the air attacks in general had more of a psychological than strategic value, they generated considerable chaos in the Nacaome-El Amatillo region and the Nueva Ocotepeque area. In both places, the airstrikes conducted by the Salvadoran Cessnas and Pipers were followed by heavy artillery and machine-gun attacks against the border posts and military facilities nearby, which caught the Honduran troops completely by surprise, as some of them still were setting up defensive positions or in the process of being reinforced and resupplied. Reinforcement of the positions at El Amatillo quickly became problematic when the advance of the trucks carrying the troops and supplies from Tegucigalpa was hampered by a massive exodus of families that flooded the road towards Nacaome, in a desperate attempt to escape the areas being attacked.

Surprisingly, the airstrike also caught the FAH headquarters offguard. During the preceding weeks, its F4U-5s and T-28s had been mounting constant patrol flights along the southern border and over Tegucigalpa, but at the time the air attack began, the airplanes had already landed and Colonel Soto Cano had decided to give his pilots a much-deserved break,[5] sending them home to change clothes and spend some time with their families after having been away for several days. Hence, it wasn't until an hour later that most of the pilots had rushed back to Toncontín, allowing four F4U-5s to be scrambled to intercept the attacking airplanes.[6] These Corsairs were flown by Lieutenant Colonel José Serra, Major Oscar Colíndres and Captains Fernando Soto and Francisco Zepeda. Instead of flying in pairs, the four Corsairs followed different routes after taking off, always in the general direction of El

Salvador. In the case of Lieutenant Colonel Serra[7], he arrived over the El Amatillo-Nacaome area in marginal weather conditions that made it virtually impossible to locate any Salvadoran aircraft. Before returning to base, Serra decided to descend over the Salvadoran port of Cutuco, which he strafed twice. In his after-mission report, he stated that power had been cut off in many of the Salvadoran towns near the border. For his part, Captain Fernando Soto[8] flew to the south-west until reaching the Lempa River near Magdalena, in the Intibucá Department, before the difficult weather conditions in the region forced him to return to Toncontín. Major Colíndres[9] and Captain Zepeda[10] also focused on the areas near El Amatillo and Nacaome respectively, but they too opted to return to their base after a couple of minutes due to bad weather. The first Honduran combat sortie of the war nearly ended dramatically, however, because one of the Corsairs almost ran off of the runway during the landing, while another had a prop strike upon touching down. At the time, Toncontín did not have runway lighting, and for this reason night operations were forbidden. In their after-mission reports, the four pilots proudly stated that they had conducted the FAH's first nocturnal landings.[11]



Aerial view of the La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula, as seen during the war. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

By then, Colonel Soto Cano had finished inspecting the airbase and airport for any damage. Incredibly, the bombs dropped by the Salvadoran C-47 had completely missed their target,[12] with some hitting an unpopulated mountain south of the airport, while others fell on the San José subdivision near Comayagüela and a few kilometres west, on the 15 de Septiembre subdivision, without causing any damage.

Around the same time, at the *Casa Presidencial,* the Army's high command began receiving reports from military posts across the country, and the officers couldn't believe what they were hearing. Objectives that any other air arm would have attacked, such as the Puerto Cortés oil refinery, the aviation fuel storage facilities in Toncontín or La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula where 40 percent of FAH aircraft were based had been left untouched by the FAS. In contrast, 11 population centres including three villages without any strategic or tactical value had been bombed, causing only minor damage. In the great scheme of things, the Salvadoran 'massive' airstrike turned out to be completely irrelevant. That, however, didn't stop President López Arellano from moving his office to the Honduran National Bank's vault during the evening.[13]

Even though the Honduran Army's high command was aware of the ongoing Salvadoran artillery attacks on El Amatillo and El Poy, the situation on the ground was far worse than anyone could have expected. Around 7:30 p.m., the Salvadoran 105mm howitzers and 81mm mortars began pounding defensive positions that the Hondurans had set up along the Goascorán River's east bank near the town of Aramecina.[14] Overwhelmed, it didn't take long for the defenders to retreat into the town, looking for cover from the explosive shells and mortar rounds that were raining on them. As soon as the Hondurans began retreating, troops of the Salvadoran 5th Infantry Battalion explored the Goascorán's west bank for shallow areas where they could cross into Honduras, something that was achieved less than two hours later.

While this was happening, the Salvadoran 4th and 11th Infantry Battalions were trying to seize and secure the bridge over the Goascorán River, with the help of heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. This operation was of major importance because as soon as the bridge had been secured, the trucks, tanks and armoured vehicles of the *Escuadrón de Caballería Motorizada* would be able to cross safely into Honduras. The mission was accomplished around 9:00 p.m., and minutes later, several M35s packed with troops, escorted by a

handful of Niñas armoured vehicles, rolled into Honduras virtually unchallenged. Simultaneously, troops of the Salvadoran Special Forces also crossed the Goascorán River near the town of El Amatillo and advanced towards the Inter-American Highway in order to join the 11th Infantry Battalion, which at this point was advancing towards Nacaome.

During the night, the towns of El Amatillo, Aramecina, Goascorán and Alianza were all quickly captured by the Salvadorans, forcing the Honduran *Agrupamiento Táctico Apolo 1* (Tactical Group Apolo 1), which was the main unit in charge of the area's defence and comprised the 1st and *La Trinidad* Infantry Battalions, to fall back and set up advanced combat posts in the foothills of Las Chiches and El Ujuste, and along the Inter-American Highway near Nacaome. Its main line of defence was established along the El Picacho, El Rincón, La Mesa and Diente Blanco mountains. A last line of defence, referred to as the BETA Line, was also defined, running from north of Langue to south of Coyolar, north of El Picachito hill and ending north of San Pedro Calero. There were orders that under no circumstances would the Salvadorans be allowed to cross beyond that line, since it would compromise the security of Tegucigalpa itself.

By then, and to make things worse, the defence posts that the Hondurans had set up on the Zacatillo and El Tigre islands, both located in the Gulf of Fonseca, had been overrun by troops of the 6th Infantry Battalion in an unprecedented amphibian operation that ended with the capture of the town of Amapala.

Even though the Salvadorans had not crossed the border in the Nueva Ocotepeque area, the situation there was no better for the Hondurans, since the artillery had already destroyed the El Poy border post and was shelling with outstanding precision their advanced combat positions along the road to Nueva Ocotepeque, at the Juntal ravine and on the hills in the Cayaguanca region. As was the case in the east, the defending troops, and the members of the civic committees that supported them, were forced to retreat into Nueva Ocotepeque. However, once this defensive manoeuvre was completed, the Salvadoran gunners decided to try their luck and began firing 105mm shells at the provincial town, hitting the Central Park and other buildings nearby, much to the dismay of the retreating Hondurans.

Back in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran Army's high command was still trying to come out of its stupor. As unbelievable as it may seem, these officers and President López Arellano himself thought that the airstrikes and the limited

incursions of the Salvadoran troops in the El Amatillo area were not yet worthy of a military response. Instead, a series of air attacks against strategic targets in El Salvador was suggested by the FAH's Commander, Colonel Soto Cano, but the infantry officers of the Army's high command quickly dismissed the idea,[15] as they thought that such missions could compromise the air arm's resources, which in any case should be used to support the troops on the combat fronts. The Honduran Foreign Minister, Dr Tiburcio Carías, was also opposed to aerial attacks against targets in El Salvador, proposing instead that the armed forces should limit themselves to repel the invasion of Honduran territory, all with the purpose of requesting by diplomatic channels a cessation of hostilities and to seek having the OAS declare El Salvador as the aggressor.

Despite overwhelming opposition, Colonel Soto Cano kept trying to convince the president and the Army's Staff of the need to return the blow, striking far inland, to the very heart of El Salvador. From Colonel Soto Cano's standpoint, it was of vital importance to heavily attack the FAS airbases and destroy their airplanes on the ground, with the aim of immediately achieving aerial superiority. He also considered that the Salvadoran fuel depots should be attacked and destroyed, in order to limit the Salvadoran Army's actions. At one point, the situation was so tense that Colonel Soto Cano went to the extreme of arguing in a loud voice with the president and the high command's officers about the importance of effecting these strategic attacks. It wasn't until 11:00 p.m. that a still reticent López Arellano authorized Colonel Soto Cano to launch an airstrike[16]. Minutes later, the FAH's commander rushed back to Toncontín in order to brief his pilots and get the aircraft ready.

5

RETURNING THE PUNCH

During the first few minutes of 15 July, the ‘strategic’ bombing that Colonel Soto Cano wished so much to inflict upon the Salvadorans, finally began taking shape. Just as their Salvadoran counterparts had done, a group of FAH mechanics had installed rails along the cargo hold floor of the C-47 transport marked with the serial FAH-304, and were loading the airplane with 18 AN-M30 bombs. Meanwhile, in the cockpit, the crew led by Captain Rodolfo Figueroa was already going through the ‘Before Engines Start’ checklist. Their mission would be to bomb Ilopango airport, so long as they could negotiate the marginal weather conditions along the way.

At 1:50 a.m., the C-47 finally took off from the Toncontín runway, and in complete darkness, headed towards El Salvador. Minutes later, however, a warning light on the instruments panel forced the crew to abort the mission and return to Tegucigalpa. Upon landing, the FAH mechanics rushed to remove the bombs and cargo railings and transferred them to another C-47, in this case carrying the serial FAH-306.

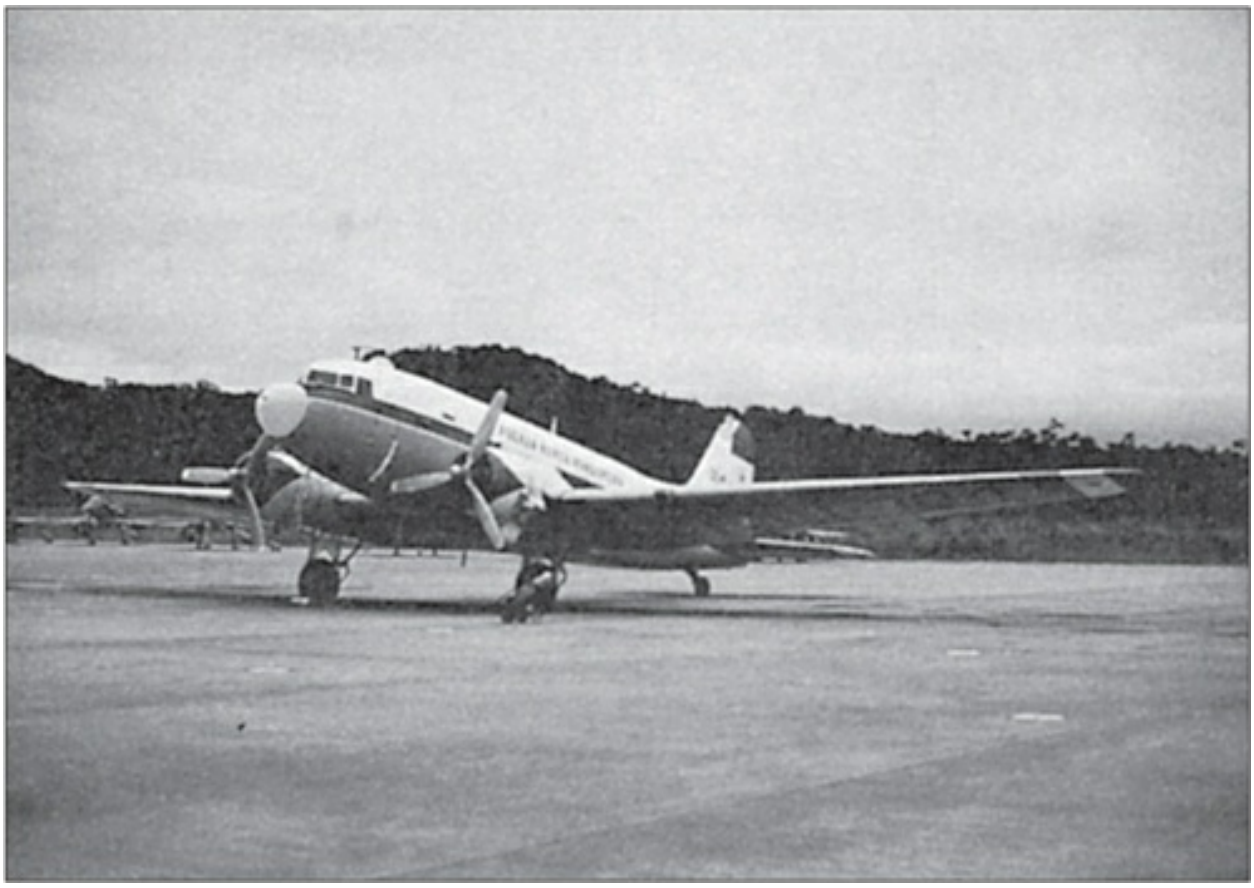
It wasn’t until 3:20 a.m. that the second C-47 was able to take off from Toncontín. Along the way, Captain Figueroa noted that none of the Salvadoran radio aid facilities were operating, so he had to rely on his time and distance calculations in order to reach the target. If he made any mistakes in his navigation, the C-47 could end up anywhere but over the place it was intended to be, as this region of Central America, as of 1969, was sprinkled with few lights and was a pitch black that few not native to the area could appreciate.

Around 4:10 a.m., Captain Figueroa considered that he was over the target. He wasn’t sure, however, because due to the weather conditions and the generalized blackout in the Salvadoran capital, he hadn’t been able to visually locate Ilopango Airport. With nothing left to do but trust his calculations, he ordered the cargo master to roll out the bombs while establishing a tight circular pattern at 10,000ft above the area where he thought the airport was. In less than five minutes, the 18 bombs were gone and the old bird climbed

away, heading back to its base.[1]

As soon as the C-47 was back in Honduran airspace, Figueroa radioed Colonel Soto Cano informing him that the results of the mission were inconclusive. The crew had been able to hear the bombs exploding, but no one could obtain a visual confirmation of where they had fallen. Sensing that this mission wouldn't be enough to deter the Salvadorans, the FAH Commander decided to contravene President López Arellano's order about launching only one airstrike, and without delay ordered another bombing mission. Hence, at 4:20 a.m., three F4U-5Ns and a F4U-4 took off from Toncontín and rapidly headed towards El Salvador.[2] These fighters, flown by Major Oscar Colíndres, Captains Fernando Soto and Francisco Zepeda, and Lieutenant Santiago Perdomo, were each carrying a single AN-M64 500lb general purpose bomb and 800 20mm cannon rounds. Their mission was to attack Ilopango for a second time and then the port of Cutuco, located in the Department of La Union.

While the Honduran Corsairs raced towards their target, a pair of Salvadoran FG-1Ds left Ilopango to bomb Toncontín[3] (according to Salvadoran sources, three FG-1Ds had been readied for that mission, but one of them had engine problems and couldn't take off). Inevitably, the adversaries crossed paths at some point over Salvadoran airspace, but as incredible as it may seem, at no time were the pilots of either flight able to see the other. There have been claims that the Salvadoran pilots located the Honduran fighters while these were headed towards Ilopango, and that they requested authorization to drop their bombs and pursue them. However, subsequent investigations revealed that this was simply not the case, as the Honduran Corsairs were able to make it to Ilopango undisturbed.



On 15 July, this Douglas C-47, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-304, was launched on a nocturnal bombing sortie against Ilopango. However, due to an engine malfunction, the mission was aborted. (Photo credit: Dan Hagedorn Collection)

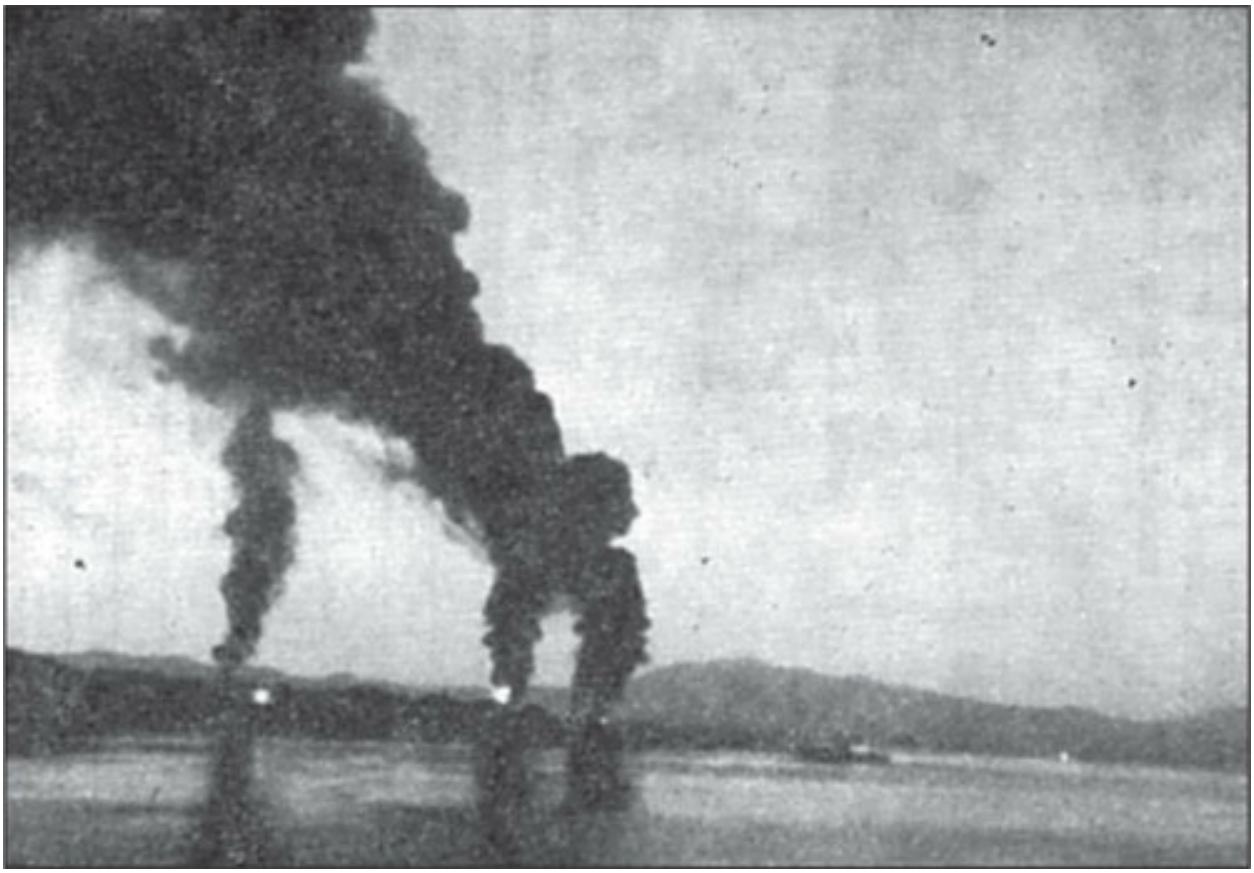
Vought F4U-4, FAH-612, posing with the types of ordnance that it could carry. The infamous *'Piñas'* – locally made cluster bombs – can be seen on the right, between the practice bombs and the AN-M30 100lb bomb. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

As the FAH Corsairs approached the airport, several anti-aircraft machine guns opened fire, forcing the pilots to start their bombing runs at 9,000ft, much higher than desired. One of the bombs hit the junction of the northsouth and eastwest runways and opened a crater in the surface; the second bomb fell 500 metres from the airport terminal without exploding, while the third fell between two empty hangars, where it destroyed a fuel truck, causing damage to two crated engines belonging to the FAS DC-4M and to offices in the hangar next to the point of impact. The fourth bomb definitely missed its target, since it did not explode and was never found, at least inside the Ilopango Airport area.

A report from the US Military Assistance Advisory Group stated that the Honduran bombs had damaged a C-47 transport and a Mustang II that was parked in a hangar. This simply wasn't true, however, because the whereabouts of all the Salvadoran C-47s and Mustang IIs, before and after the war, are very well documented, and no losses of either type were reported on that day. What could possibly help to explain MilGroup's confusing report

is that the wreckage of the Mustang II serialled FAS-402, which had crashed in October 1968, was kept in one of the hangars, to be used as a spares source for the remaining aircraft in the fleet.

The wreckage of the Mustang II FAS-402 that crashed on 8 October 1968 was kept at Ilopango airbase as a source of spare parts. Incredibly, its presence was mistaken by observers of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group who reported it as destroyed during the Honduran air attack on 15 July. (Photo credit: Salvadoran Aviation Museum)



The aftermath of the Honduran airstrike against the port of Cutuco on 15 July. The plumes of black smoke rising into the sky caught the attention of the media covering the conflict. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

But confusion regarding this episode does not stop there: Salvadoran sources claim that at least a pair of Mustang IIs took off during the attack and faced the Honduran Corsairs. However, this couldn't have been possible because at that time Ilopango was deserted, as the majority of the FAS airplanes had been dispersed to other airfields on the Pacific coast. Perhaps the most solid proof that this dogfight didn't take place is that a few minutes later, the Honduran Corsairs descended over the port of Cutuco and strafed it virtually unchallenged. This attack caused several fires in the asphalt deposits at the port, which produced the spectacular plumes of black smoke that caught so much the attention of the media covering the incident. Cutuco's fuel storage tanks, which were the main objective of the mission, were also strafed successfully and remained out of commission for the rest of the war.

As an interesting aside, Cutuco's storage tanks were the source of considerable quantities of fuel used to supply other countries in the region, including ironically Honduras. However, the damage to these installations

didn’t compromise the supply of fuel for the FAH aircraft and for the Honduran Army vehicles during the war, because the government had opted to acquire it in Belize and Nicaragua, from where it was being transported by aircraft of the Honduran commercial airlines SAHSA and TAN. Additionally, shortly before the start of the war, the government had withdrawn the total allotment of their fuel quota from Cutuco, using fuel tanker trucks for this purpose. The Salvadoran president had been notified about this unusual event by his staff, and he was asked not to authorize the dispatch of the fuel. Sánchez Hernandez refused to make that decision, however, because it practically meant an act of aggression and the hostilities had evidently not yet started.

This particular Vought F4U-4, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-614, sported an unusual colour scheme during the war. Painted in light grey, the airplane contrasted with the rest of the Corsairs in the fleet, which sported the common dark blue scheme. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Shortly after the FAH F4U-5Ns had departed Toncontín to attack Ilopango and Cutuco, Colonel Soto Cano ordered a third airstrike,[4] to be carried out by four F4U-4s based at the La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula, supported by a Douglas C-54B transport, serialled FAH-795 and flown by Colonel Mario Chichilla and 2nd Lieutenant Oscar Sosa, which would serve as a command and communications platform.

While the F4U-5Ns were finishing their attack on Cutuco, the F4U-4s, led by Captain Aguirre, began their own attack against the fuel storage tanks at Acajutla port, without encountering any opposition, since the anti-aircraft batteries that had been emplaced on the surrounding hills had been relocated in accordance with orders from the Salvadoran Army's high command. In fact, the attack on the port caught them while they were being moved. Within minutes, the Honduran Corsairs managed to set on fire some of the gasoline and diesel storage tanks, causing impressive columns of black smoke to shoot skyward. By pure chance, the butane gas deposits were not hit, thus avoiding a huge tragedy that would almost certainly have resulted in the total destruction of the port and the towns nearby. Of the 180,000 barrels of different types of fuel that were stored at Acajutla, approximately 20 percent were lost, while the remainder was saved by rerouting it through a fire-prevention system, and the fuel would be later stored in new storage tanks to be refined again.

According to Salvadoran historians, the attack on Acajutla did not represent a danger to El Salvador's fuel supply. While the repairs to the refinery and other installations would take over a year, the Salvadoran government opted to modify the fuel supplying system, and the tanker ships anchored directly at the port, instead of at the maritime terminals as they had before, thus allowing the fuel trucks to be loaded directly from the docked ships. Camouflaged fuel tanker trucks even reached inside Honduran territory to the El Amatillo zone, the Theatre of Operations Chalatenango and the Nueva Ocotepeque front, to supply Salvadoran forces operating in those sectors.

On 15 July, four Honduran Vought F4U-4s conducted an airstrike against the Salvadoran port of Acajutla, setting on fire some of its gasoline and diesel storage tanks. (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gráfica*)

During the return flight to La Mesa airfield, the F4U-4 serialled FAH-617, flown by Captain Walter López, began losing fuel at an alarming rate. Radio silence was broken when Captain López declared his emergency and began discussing with the other pilots what to do. After a couple of minutes, it was decided to continue the flight, hoping that the crippled Corsair would be able to make it back to base. Unfortunately, the fuel gauge for the tank being used continued its relentless march towards empty. To add to their problems, the pilots were informed that visibility would be reduced along the way and that La Mesa airfield was covered by low clouds. It was at this point that Captain López decided to leave the formation and set course towards Guatemalan territory. Minutes later, the Honduran pilot made an emergency landing at the airstrip of the El Pilar ranch, near the town of Morales in the Guatemalan Department of Izabal. During the day, a Guatemalan Air Force C-47 transport arrived in El Pilar, carrying aircraft mechanics and also Captain Leonel Solis, who ferried FAH- 617 to Guatemala City, once the necessary repairs were completed. Captain López was also taken to the Guatemalan capital, where he spent the rest of the war, ultimately becoming friends with Captain Benjamin Trabanino, the Salvadoran pilot who had been interned the day

before.

There are some versions of FAH-617's emergency, mainly coming from Salvadoran sources, which mention the presence of an Israeli merchant vessel riding at anchor in Acajutla, which felt threatened during the Honduran attack and opened fire with its own antiaircraft armament, damaging the Honduran Corsair. However, none of the pilots who participated in the mission recall anything like that happening. It seems that the damage sustained by FAH-617 was caused by shrapnel from one of its own bombs. Another Corsair that sustained damage was that flown by Captain Francisco Zepeda during the air strike against Ilopango and Cutuco.[6] It is not clear where this airplane was hit by the Salvadoran anti-aircraft artillery, but in his after-mission report the pilot stated that several bullet holes were discovered in the lower part of the fuselage.

Around 6:00 a.m., when the Honduran Corsairs were still on their way back to their respective bases, the Salvadoran FG-1Ds finally arrived over Toncontín. Flying extremely low, the two aircraft had managed to evade an armed T-28 that was patrolling around Tegucigalpa, precisely in anticipation of any such incursion. Once over the airport, one of the FG-1Ds, flown by Captain Mauricio Girón, dropped two AN-M30 bombs, one of which exploded on an empty field next to the runway and the other on a paved road nearby. The other fighter, flown by Captain Reynaldo Cortéz, dropped its two AN-M30 bombs very close to the gates that, from the street, opened to the airbases hangars. Both airplanes then circled back and strafed the facade of the Military Aviation School, the airbase's hangars and the air terminal building, albeit without inflicting major damage.

During the attack, the T-28 FAH-212 that was patrolling over Tegucigalpa, piloted by 2nd Lieutenant Roberto Mendoza Garay, was vectored into the area and tried to pursue the Salvadoran airplanes, managing to hit Cortéz's Corsair a couple of times. Almost at the same time, Lieutenant Colonel José Serra, at the controls of an F4U-5N, took off to replace Mendoza's T-28 on base defence patrol duty. As he climbed away, Cortéz's FG-1D passed alongside him, and Serra quickly manoeuvred to place himself behind the Salvadoran Corsair and tried to fire his four 20mm cannons, only to discover that they were jammed. Meanwhile, Captain Girón noticed that Serra's F4U-5N had managed to take off, so he made a violent break over the runway and successfully escaped, heading back to El Salvador.

At Toncontín, everyone believed that one of the Salvadoran Corsairs had

crashed near Comayagüela; hence a search party was dispatched to the area, but they found, through some of the townspeople, that although they had observed an airplane spewing smoke, flying very low, it had afterwards climbed away, heading in a south-westerly direction.[8] Less than an hour later, Cortéz's FG-1D managed to land at Ilopango, where a battery cable that had been cut by the T-28's gunfire and had caused the smoke stream, was quickly replaced. The airplane was then refuelled and allowed to continue towards its assigned dispersion airfield. After this airstrike, the Salvadoran Armed Forces claimed that more than half of the FAH's aircraft had been destroyed on the ground at Toncontín. Incredibly, even to this day, there are veterans of the war, mostly pilots, who insist that this was the case.

Vought F4U-4, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-617. This airplane was interned in Guatemala on 15 July 1969. Flown by Captain Walter López, the aircraft was hit by shrapnel from its own bombs during the airstrike on Acajutla, and began losing fuel at an alarming rate. This forced the pilot to divert to El Pilar Ranch in Guatemala, where Captain López made an emergency landing. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Vought F4U-4, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-617, photographed at La Aurora Airbase in Guatemala City after being interned. (Photo credit: Guatemalan Air Force Photo Archives)

Around 7:00 a.m., all the FAH aircraft that had participated in the air attacks against targets in El Salvador began returning to their respective bases. It was at this time also that Colonel Soto Cano received a call from a furious López Arellano. In that call, the Honduran president expressly prohibited the FAH Commander from launching any additional 'strategic' missions, and instructed him that his pilots should not enter – under any circumstances – Salvadoran territory, because that could compromise the ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at having El Salvador declared the aggressor.

Meanwhile, the situation of the Honduran forces in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area was deteriorating quickly. The Salvadoran 5th Infantry Battalion, supported by a pair of FG-1Ds, had successfully attacked the towns of Caridad and Aramecina, while the 4th Battalion had taken Goascoran with ease. Not far from there, the Special Forces Company, supported by a Mustang II, had overwhelmed the Honduran defences around Alianza, and was in the process of securing the town. In all cases, the Honduran troops had retreated inland, with some units seeking cover in the mountains around San Francisco de Coray, while others opted to flee towards Langue and San Antonio, both in the Valle department. By then, the only Honduran defensive positions still standing in the area were those located at La Arada, and in the El Ujuste and Las Chiches hills. These three combat posts had the responsibility of blocking any Salvadoran advance over the Inter- American

Highway towards Nacaome, where the field command post had been established, and eventually towards Tegucigalpa.

At around 7:30 a.m., the Salvadoran artillery resumed its attacks against the Honduran positions along the Inter-American Highway, while troops of the 4th Battalion left Goascoran with the mission to destroy the Honduran combat posts in the El Ujuste and Las Chiches hills. The plan was to clear the way so the 11th Battalion, at that moment awaiting orders at El Amatillo, and the Special Forces Company coming from Alianza, could advance towards Nacaome. However, as soon as the convoy approached the area, the first heavy clashes took place. Within minutes, the Honduran bazookas and M20 75mm recoilless rifles destroyed a tank and a couple of M35 trucks, causing several casualties in the process. An hour later, and much to the dismay of the Salvadoran troops who had been told that the FAH had been completely destroyed, a flight of three F4U-5Ns, flown by Major Oscar Colíndres and Captains Fernando Soto and Edgardo Acosta, arrived over the area and immediately began dropping AN-M64 bombs over them. The three fighters then circled back and made several strafing runs that left many Salvadorans dead or injured. For most of the morning, the FAH F4U-5Ns, the T-28s and the AT-6s flew more than 12 air strike missions over the El Ujuste and Las Chiches hills, trying to stop the Salvadoran attack. By midday, however, the Honduran positions had been overrun and the troops were fleeing towards Langue and Nacaome.[9] During the afternoon, the FAH pilots began attacking Salvadoran positions at El Amatillo, Goascorán and the few Salvadoran troops moving over the Inter-American Highway. These airstrikes, launched every hour, forced the Salvadorans to consolidate their defensive positions and postpone their offensive against Nacaome.

The North American T-28As of the Honduran Air Force conducted several patrol missions around Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula during the war. In one of those missions, the airplane serialled FAH-212, flown by 2nd Lieutenant Roberto Mendoza Garay, managed to hit one of two Salvadoran FG-1Ds that attacked Toncontín. (Photo credit: Mario Lavagnino, via the Honduran Air Museum)

Along the Western front, the Salvadorans had launched a large-scale operation aimed at taking the city of Nueva Ocotepeque.[10] Around 8:00 a.m., two Salvadoran C-47s, proceeding from Ilopango, had bombed the Honduran positions located on the access routes to the provincial town and the neighbouring villages, with the purpose of softening the defences and opening the way for the invading forces. The 1st Infantry Battalion then crossed the border and began advancing along the highway towards Nueva Ocotepeque, while the 8th did the same but through the foothills between the Cayaguanca and the Chicotera mountains. Not far from there, the '*Tigres del Norte*' commando company also entered Honduras and advanced along the west bank of the Lempa River with the aim of capturing the Nueva Ocotepeque airfield. The last unit to cross the border was the battalion of the *Guardia Nacional* led by General Alberto Medrano, which did so near the town of Las Pilas.

The crew of the Douglas C-47 FAS-101, posing with their aircraft upon returning from a bombing mission over Nueva Ocotepeque. During that mission, a Honduran Corsair intercepted them and damaged one of the airplane's engines. They had to make an emergency landing at Ilopango. From left to right: Sergeant Muñoz, Captain Adrian Panameño (co-pilot), Major Sigfredo Velasco (pilot) and Lieutenant Daniel Cañas. (Photo credit: Salvadoran Aviation Museum)

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FAS BOMBARDEA A HONDURAS

INFORMACION EN PAGINA TRES

Ejército avanza sobre Honduras

INFORMACION EN PAGINA [illegible]

Ejército avanza.— Firme y decisivo es el avance de las tropas de infantería del ejército salvadoreño en territorio de Honduras. La determinación de avanzar sobre el territorio hondureño, fue tomada por el presidente de la república y Comandante General de la Fuerza Armada de El Salvador, general Fidel Sánchez Hernández, como respuesta a los continuos ultrajes de ese país a la dignidad y soberanía de nuestra patria. Deber del ejército salvadoreño, según la Constitución Política lo ordena, velar por la integridad territorial, y al actuar, en la forma que lo está haciendo, ha cumplido con un deber patriótico. Honduras está acusado de genocidio en militares de salvadoreños.

The headline that *La Prensa Gráfica* newspaper ran on 15 July 1969: 'The FAS bombs

Honduras – The Army advances over Honduras' (Photo credit: *La Prensa Gráfica*)

At 8:20 a.m., three FAH F4U-4s, proceeding from La Mesa and piloted by Captain Carlos Aguirre and Lieutenants Edgardo Mejía and Marco Rivera, arrived over the El Poy area and began bombing the artillery positions that the Salvadorans had emplaced near the border post and around the town, taking out a couple of the 105mm howitzers and destroying the customs building. The Corsairs then began strafing the troops advancing along the road to Nueva Ocotepeque, but with little result, as the soldiers lost no time in running for cover in the nearby hills. Minutes later, the Corsairs were directed towards the town of Citala, where a couple of howitzers had just started firing. The three F4U-4s arrived over the area and immediately began strafing the artillery positions. While coming out from one of those strafing runs, Lieutenant Rivera, flying the Corsair with the serial FAH-615, spotted a Salvadoran C-47 heading back to its base after having bombed the Honduran advanced combat posts on the Chicotera hill. Lieutenant Rivera immediately went after the transport and managed to hit it in the fuselage and one of the engines.[11] Much to Rivera's dismay, the C-47 was able to escape into Salvadoran airspace, although trailing smoke. Later on, it was established that the C-47 serialled FAS-101, piloted by Major Sigfredo Velasco and Captain Adrian Panameño, had barely made it to Ilopango, where it made an emergency landing that put it out of commission for the duration of the war.

After forcing the C-47 to flee, Lieutenant Rivera noticed that a Mustang II was making its way towards the border at high speed. As before, the young pilot went after it, firing bursts of his six .50 cal machine guns until he ran out of ammunition. The Salvadoran fighter was able to make it across the border and headed back to its base.

Rivers of ink have been spilled over this particular incident, since this Mustang II was assigned to protect FAS-101, but at the time of Lieutenant Rivera's attack on the C-47, the fighter wasn't in the area. Salvadoran sources state that the Mustang II had temporarily abandoned the C-47 in order to strafe a Honduran convoy, when Rivera attacked it. Honduran sources, on the other hand, claim that the C-47 was alone at the time of Rivera's attack, and acknowledge the presence of the Mustang II only when Lieutenant Rivera had called off the chase of the transport and was heading back to base. The Honduran sources also mention that the Salvadoran fighter was clearly in an evasive position just prior to being attacked by Lieutenant Rivera. Years

later, Sergeant Salvador Gómez Paz, one of the mechanics flying onboard FAS-101, also revealed during an interview that the C-47 was being escorted by a Mustang II, which left the transport without protection at the worst possible time. Situations in which Salvadoran escort aircraft abandoned their escorted transports while these were being attacked, became frequent from that point onwards, thus giving credence to numerous versions of this account, usually stating that some of the pilots were probably mercenaries who didn't like to be involved in compromising situations, always opting to withdraw without fighting. These arguments have eluded verification, however, and there may well be more mundane explanations.

During the rest of the morning, intense combats took place along the Ocotepeque front, especially at Ticante Creek, where Salvadoran troops faced ferocious resistance from the Hondurans; if it wasn't for the 105mm howitzers that were providing fire support, it wouldn't have been possible for them to continue their advance.

By midday, the Salvadoran forces had managed to capture the Honduran towns of Valladolid, Guarita, Junigual and San Marcos Ocotepeque, and were already preparing a final push towards Nueva Ocotepeque. With this major advance, it became necessary to resupply the troops operating on the Western front. The airstrip at San Marcos Ocotepeque was therefore secured and prepared for receiving the Salvadoran C-47s, which soon after began arriving packed-full of ammunition, equipment and food, that was immediately channelled to the troops besieging Nueva Ocotepeque and the other units operating along the Chalatenango front. Surprisingly, none of these flights were intercepted or harassed by FAH aircraft.

Meanwhile, back at Toncontín, Colonel Soto Cano had realised that the number of available aircraft was insufficient to continue providing support for the ground troops on two fronts and at the same time to establish an aerial watch network for stopping the incursions of Salvadoran aircraft. Thus, with the aim of establishing constant air patrols around Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, civilian pilots were enlisted and their aircraft requisitioned. At the same time, and in view of an imminent shortage of ordnance, the FAH mechanics at La Mesa began modifying several hundred practice 70mm rockets, replacing their inert heads with demolition grenades and an adapted fuse.[12] (Apparently, the only FAH aircraft that carried these modified rockets into combat were the F4U-4s based at La Mesa.) At Toncontín, on the other hand, the mechanics were desperately looking for a solution to the chronic

problems encountered with the 20mm cannons installed on the F4U-5Ns, which were jamming, usually in combat at the worst possible time.

At Ilopango, Major Henríquez was also coming to terms with his air arm deficiencies. First, the pilots flying the Mustang IIs were complaining that the wingtip tanks on their aircraft took away too much manoeuvrability and speed. As a temporary solution, it was decided that the airplanes would fly with only the fuel required to complete their missions, thus attempting to reduce weight and increase manoeuvrability. Secondly, none of the fighters had air- to-ground communications equipment, and coordinating close air support with the troops had turned out to be nearly impossible. Baldocchi was ordered to look for suitable solutions to these problems. Despite the shortcomings, which were communicated to the Army's high command during the afternoon, Major Henríquez was ordered to launch a new 'strategic' air strike the next day, during which FAS aircraft would bomb Cortés port, the town of Golosón and, allegedly, the El Cajón dam near Lake Yojoa, neither of which had a real strategic value, especially the latter, as it was still under construction.

During the afternoon, the Salvadoran Army's 1st Infantry Battalion had finally forced the small Honduran detachment protecting Nueva Ocotepeque to retreat along the road south of the town's airfield. Not far from there, the 8th Infantry Battalion had already crushed the advanced combat posts that the Hondurans had established in the hills east of the town. What followed was the almost complete annihilation of Honduran defence forces around Nueva Ocotepeque, something that was described by Thomas P. Anderson as "pretty much of a massacre",[13] with the Salvadorans suffering only light casualties during the heavy fighting. In the evening, the provincial town was finally seized, and during the night, the Salvadorans managed to secure the region, except for the occasional snipers operating from the surrounding hills, who continued causing trouble until the end of hostilities.

After the consolidation of the two fronts on 15 July, the Salvadoran Army's high command made the controversial decision to appoint Colonels Ramón Navas and César Mendoza as 'Military Governors' in Nueva Ocotepeque and Goascorán respectively. This surprising action gave the basis to accusations against the Salvadoran government regarding the true reasons for starting the conflict, and at the same time gave credence to hypotheses that the invasion was in fact a colonization war aimed at the total occupation of Honduras.

6

OUT OF STEAM

The fall of Nueva Ocotepeque delivered a heavy psychological blow to the Honduran Armed Forces, and, during the early hours of 16 July, the pervasive sense of shock still was reverberating through the ranks. This was clearly reflected during an urgent meeting held at *Casa Presidencial*, where the officers that formed the Army's high command had a really difficult time trying to decide what to do in order to salvage the situation. Even President López Arellano was having problems assimilating what had just happened, and it took quite some time for everyone to regain their composure. The high command eventually proposed a somewhat desperate plan[1] that comprised two phases: the first of which was to launch an all-out counteroffensive in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area, aimed at deflecting the attention of the Salvadorans from the Nueva Ocotepeque front, which hopefully would delay their advance towards Santa Rosa de Copán and other towns in the north. The second phase, to be executed simultaneously, would involve reinforcing the defences around Santa Rosa de Copán with troops from the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion and the Presidential Guard. With that, the Hondurans hoped, the Salvadoran invasion would stall, allowing the government enough time to seek the OAS' involvement.

This would be a highly controversial operation, however, because deploying the *Guardia de Honor* and the Presidential Guard meant that Tegucigalpa would be left defenceless, and if the counter-attack on the El Amatillo-Nacaome front failed, the Salvadorans would be free to advance towards the capital virtually unopposed. Its execution would also be very difficult, because on the one hand, the units deployed on both fronts were running short of ammunition and were having persistent problems with the batteries of their PRC-6 and PRC-10 tactical radios; and on the other, the entire *Guardia de Honor* Battalion and the Presidential Guard would have to be airlifted – as soon as possible – to Santa Rosa de Copán.

When the high command broke the news about the plan to the field

commanders, some of them replied that it wasn't practicable and suggested that the best option was to resist on both fronts as long as possible with what little resources they had, while a diplomatic solution could be worked out. Others insisted on launching the counteroffensive while it was still possible. It wasn't until 3:00 a.m. that President López Arellano finally made the decision about launching the operation, and shortly after, the respective orders were issued to all combat units in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area. Colonel Soto Cano was ordered to prepare the FAH's five C-47 transports for airlifting the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion and the *Guardia Presidencial* to Santa Rosa de Copán. Sensing that the handful of FAH transports wouldn't be enough for carrying out the mission, the indefatigable Air Force Commander enlisted the help of the SAHSA airline, which promptly supplied a pair of its own C-47s for transporting the troops. The first FAH C-47 took off from Toncontín at 4:00 a.m. with the initial group of more than 1,000 soldiers that formed the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion. Along the way, the transport was met by a pair of F4U-4s that had been scrambled from La Mesa for escorting it. Colonel Soto Cano's plan was that, while the F4U-4s based at San Pedro Sula would provide protection for the transports during the airlift, the Toncontín- based F4U-5Ns, T-28s and AT-6s would support the counter-attack in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area and conduct close air support and air superiority missions over the Nueva Ocotepeque front.[2]

A Salvadoran M3 Stuart tank sitting on a trailer at Nueva Ocotepeque, in Honduras, after the town had been taken by Salvadoran forces. (Photo credit: Book *Por Qué Fuimos a la Guerra)*

A Salvadoran M3 Stuart tank photographed at Nueva Ocotepeque. (Photo credit: Book *Por Qué Fuimos a la Guerra*)

'Las Niñas' (The Girls) were bank armoured cars that the Salvadoran Army converted into personnel carriers. In this photograph, a *Niña* is seen in one of the streets of Nueva Ocotepeque. (Photo credit: Book *Por Qué Fuimos a la Guerra*)

At 4:15 a.m., the Honduran counteroffensive began with artillery and machine-gun fire over the Salvadoran advanced combat posts in the foothills of El Ujuste and Las Chiches, and along the Inter- American Highway towards Nacaome. As expected, the heavy attack caught the Salvadorans completely off-guard, and it took them quite some time to respond, but only from afar, because during the night most of the howitzers had been repositioned close to the border while some others had been emplaced inside Salvadoran territory. After almost 45 minutes of intense shelling, the Honduran field command post, by then established temporarily at the town of La Guacimada, ordered the artillery to cease fire, so the troops from the 1st Infantry Battalion could launch their assault on the Salvadoran advanced combat posts. The idea was to push them back to at least El Amatillo and Goascorán, or even force them out of the country altogether. Meanwhile, at Toncontín, one of the most dangerous air missions ever carried out by the Hondurans[3] was about to begin. Colonel Carlos Villanueva Doblado – the G-2 Section Commander acting as special envoy of the president, had been ordered to visit all the combat units along the El Amatillo-Nacaome front to supervise how they were carrying out the counter-attack. The colonel, accompanied by his assistant and a civilian pilot named Jorge Lima, took off in a civilian Cessna 180, and, flying really low in order to avoid being shot down by any Salvadoran fighters that could be along the route, headed for Valle Lucerna, which would be his first stop. During his trip, that also took him to Marcala and Nacaome, Villanueva Doblado discovered that some of the field commanders were hesitant about sending their troops to attack the Salvadoran positions and had to draw on all his commanding skills in order to convince them to act. In other combat posts, the field commanders had already launched their troops, but were having serious problems coordinating the attacks due to the general malfunction of the tactical radios and the looming lack of ammunition. Colonel Villanueva Doblado promised to send them new batteries for the radios and resupply them with enough ammunition as soon as possible. This, however, was a desperate attempt to keep up their morale, since there were no battery replacements and the Army ammunition reserves were running low at an overwhelming rate.

Honduran troops manning an 81mm mortar tube during fighting on the El Amatillo front. (Photo credit: Via César Elvir Sierra)

The venerable AT-6s of the Honduran Air Force flew several close air support missions,

mainly over the El Amatillo front. (Photo credit: Capt. Paul Holsen II Collection)

At 6:00 a.m., while the first fighting in the assault was taking place, three F4U-5Ns, flown by Colíndres, Soto and Acosta, arrived in the area and immediately began bombing the Salvadoran artillery emplacements and strafing the combat posts near the El Ujuste and Las Chiches hills, but without much success. It was also at this time that a handful of Nicaraguan Army trucks and pick-ups reached the Honduran field command post at La Guacimada and other defensive positions around Nacaome, carrying ammunition and supplies. These vehicles, along with a Nicaraguan Air Force C-47 that parachuted supplies and crates of ammunition over the Honduran positions at Santa Rosa de Copán, had been sent by President Anastasio Somoza Debayle after a request from López Arellano. The Nicaraguan help, although insufficient for influencing the outcome of the war, surely boosted the morale of the defending troops at that particular moment, allowing them to eventually deter any Salvadoran attempt at advancing towards Nacaome. Then, at 7:30 a.m., two T-28s, piloted by Lieutenant Ramiro Cárcamo and 2nd Lieutenant Isidro Aguilar, along with two AT-6s flown by Lieutenants Lázaro Urbina and Oscar Servellón, replaced the F4U-5Ns in their close air support duties, as these fighters had to return to Toncontín to reload and refuel. Of the four planes that had just arrived, only three were able to carry out their attacks on the Salvadorans, since Lieutenant Cárcamos T-28 had an electrical problem that prevented him from firing his machine-gun pods, and had to return to Toncontín. As the morning went by, the Honduran pilots were able to complete more than 10 sorties over the El Amatillo-Nacaome area, all of them without any air opposition, since the Salvadoran FG-1Ds and Mustang Ils were absent. Until this day, it is not known why the FAS didn’t carry out any offensive actions during the Honduran counter-attack, even though the ground forces were sustaining heavy casualties. Something really bad must have happened during the night to force the FAS Commander to cancel all combat sorties. Even the ‘strategic’ mission against Puerto Cortés, Golosón and the El Cajón dam never materialized. Some Salvadoran sources claim that the alleged collision of two Mustang IIs while taxiing for take-off had something to do with it. However, there is evidence that neither of these fighters sustained any damage on this date, and all four Mustangs were airworthy the following day.

Troops of the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion during combat operations around El Portillo on the Nueva Ocotepeque front. (Photo credit: Via César Elvir Sierra)

One plausible reason for the abrupt cessation of FAS activities on 16 July could be related to the air arm's less than acceptable performance during the first two days of the war. Even though the planning of the strategic air strikes that were launched on 14 and 15 July had been excellent, the execution of those missions had been extremely poor or erratic and didn't accomplish any of the established objectives. Thus, it may well be that the Salvadoran Army's high command had placed Major Henríquez and his men under close scrutiny, to the point where the FAS Commander was denied authorization to conduct any additional missions. Another possibility could be that the FAS pilots had refused to keep flying the combat sorties, mainly because their morale had diminished considerably due to the sorry state of their aircraft and the lack of training, especially for those who manned the Mustang II squadron. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that a couple of days earlier, the Salvadoran government asked Archie Baldocchi to contact his friends and acquaintances in the air races circuit in the US just to see if anyone knew experienced fighter pilots who would be willing to fly in combat. By then, three aviators had answered the call: Ben Hall, Chuck Lyford and Bob Love.[5] Of the three, only Bob Love had combat experience,

as he was an F-86 ace in Korea, with six MiG kills to his credit. Lyford and Hall, for their part, were capable Mustang pilots but their experience was limited to air races and aerobatics. These men were already on their way from San Francisco, where they had been formally hired by the Salvadoran government, and it was expected that they would arrive in Ilopango during the afternoon.

Around 9:00 a.m., the first *Guardia de Honor* troops that had just arrived in Santa Rosa de Copán were rushed to reinforce the first line of defence that the Lempira and 3rd Battalions had set up, and that had combat posts on the hill-tops overlooking the town of El Moral, around San Marcos Ocotepeque and at La Labor, the latter being where the field command post had been established. A fourth defensive position, which was also reinforced by the recently arrived troops, was near the town of Cololaca, some 27km east of Santa Rosa de Copán, in case an attack on the city was launched from that direction. These deployments were made with extreme caution, however, since all indications were that the area was already occupied by Salvadoran forces.

What the Hondurans didn't know was that, by then, the possibility of a Salvadoran advance towards Santa Rosa de Copán was fading fast. The high command was hesitant about going any further due to the complicated situation developing in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area, and, just as the Hondurans had planned, they were already considering airlifting some units from Nueva Ocotepeque to reinforce that front. In the meantime, Salvadoran intelligence was trying desperately to find out the whereabouts of the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion, as it was suspected that the Honduran counter-attack taking place in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area would be followed by a major offensive led by that fearsome unit, which could effectively drive the Salvadoran forces out of the country.

The other factor that was stalling the Salvadoran advance along the Western front was that the *Guardia Nacional* Battalion, under the command of General Medrano, had failed to reach El Moral and secure the road between Nueva Ocotepeque and La Labor. By then, Medrano's men were having a hard time trying to navigate the extremely rough terrain south of El Moral, using maps that were later determined to be inadequate.[6] The situation for Medrano got so critical that at some point during the morning, he got lost and ended up near an area known as Plan de Rancho, close to the Salvadoran border. Once there, Medrano dispatched a column under the command of

Captain Arístides Montes towards El Moral, but these men failed to find their way to the town and, instead, headed northwest until reaching the road towards Nueva Ocotepeque, where they linked up with the 1st Battalion, which was awaiting orders there. As for Medrano, he headed north-east with the aim of attacking La Labor, but got lost again near Hacienda de Sinacar, located south-west of his intended destination.

Honduran Army trucks resupplying the troops on the El Amatillo front. (Photo credit: Via César Elvir Sierra)

Around 10:30 a.m., the Honduran counter-attack on the El Amatillo-Nacaome front, which was considered to be the most intensive during the whole conflict, began winding down. One by one, the field commanders ordered their troops to call off the assaults and effect a ‘tactical retreat’ back to their original defensive positions. This decision was made with the aim of preserving what little ammunition they had left. For their part, the Salvadoran troops had fallen back to the towns of El Amatillo, Goascorán and Alianza,

where they were consolidating their positions. By then, the Salvadoran field commanders had abandoned completely any idea of continuing an advance deeper inside Honduran territory, and offensive operations had been reduced to just a few, careful exploratory patrols. Only the Salvadoran artillery kept pounding the Honduran combat posts for most of the morning, and not even a dozen air strikes conducted by FAH pilots were able to silence the howitzers. Around midday, the Honduran high command changed its priorities and, in order to prevent a major offensive against Tegucigalpa, the field commanders were ordered to reposition their forces to protect – at any cost – the Beta Line.[7] Shortly after, the security detachments of the Military School and the Honduran Air Force were sent to reinforce the combat posts in this area.

With the situation on the El Amatillo-Nacaome front becoming more stable, the Salvadoran high command decided to resume operations in the Nueva Ocotepeque area. The first step they took was to move the field command post from El Poy to Nueva Ocotepeque. Then, the 1st Battalion was ordered to advance along the road towards El Moral in order to attack and secure that town. This operation became problematic right from the start, the jungle-covered ravines and hills on both sides of the road posing a great risk of ambush. The advance thus had to be conducted very slowly and with extreme caution. To further complicate the scenario, a trio of FAH F4U-4s taking off from La Mesa showed up and began attacking the Salvadoran troops, albeit without much success, because the forward ground controllers operating in the surrounding mountains failed to establish effective radio-communications with the attacking pilots.[8] Wasting no time, the Salvadoran radio-operators at Nueva Ocotepeque seized the opportunity and tried to trick the Honduran aviators into attacking their own troops or strafing areas far from where the Salvadoran soldiers were positioned. Surprisingly, the Honduran pilots figured out this ruse rather quickly, from then on opting to use different frequencies in their air-to-ground communications.

By 4:30 p.m., the FAH pilots had conducted more than 16 airstrikes against several targets in the Ocotepeque area, including the field command post at Nueva Ocotepeque, and had considerably delayed the Salvadoran advance towards El Moral and La Labor. The rest of the troops of the *Guardia de Honor* Battalion and the Presidential Guard that had arrived at Santa Rosa de Copán after midday, had been sent to reinforce the combat posts that the Lempira Battalion had established at the town of El Portillo and in the San Rafael de las Matarás area.

Four Vought F4U-4s of the Honduran Air Force flying in formation. The airstrikes conducted by the FAH Corsairs proved vital in stopping the Salvadoran advance. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Even though the Honduran first line of defence around Santa Rosa de Copàn seemed formidable on a map, it was estimated that these forces couldn't last more than 48 hours of sustained combat due to the widespread shortage of ammunition and supplies. Thus, it was hoped that a diplomatic solution to the conflict could be worked out during the next day or so. The situation was no different in the El Amatillo-Nacaome area, despite the morale-boost that the counterattack had produced. But the OAS still was avoiding any moves for its intervention, and the diplomatic efforts of the Honduran government had encountered a solid wall of indifference.

In El Salvador, things weren't going well for the military either. The US Embassy had discovered that, for the last couple of months, the Commander of the MilGroup and the chief of the Army MilGroup Section had been meeting daily with the officers of the Salvadoran high command in order to assist them with the planning of combat operations against Honduras. Jack R. Binns, the Labor Attaché to El Salvador at the time, described the incident at length during an interview for the Association for Diplomatic Studies,

conducted in July 1990:

> It blew our minds, but it is absolutely true. As far as we know, these American military officers were on their own and not under Washington instructions, as far as we were able to ascertain. They were involved in Salvadoran activities without knowledge of the other members of the MilGroup and certainly without the knowledge of the Embassy. One could argue that the other members of the MilGroup might have suspected something or were pretty stupid.
>
> The way we discovered this atrocious negligence of duty was even more extraordinary than the fact itself. When the Salvadorans attacked Honduras, they immediately violated the Security Assistance agreement by using the equipment and munitions that we had provided for something other than self-defense and against a non-Soviet or Communist power. We were required by law and by reason to suspend our military assistance program which meant withdrawing all our advisors from all Salvadoran units and breaking all relationships with the Salvadoran military. That was very politically heart-felt in Washington because the whole incursion came as a great surprise. The Embassy, except perhaps some of the MilGroup, recognized that the suspension of assistance was the only right and proper response that could be made. So, we stopped all supplies. That mean for example that all Salvadoran planes were immediately grounded for lack of spare parts. This greatly upset the Salvadorans. They called the Ambassador [Bill Bowdler] in and told him that they were very upset. He told them that his hands were tied; they had violated an agreement and our law was quite clear. We didn't have any choice. The Salvadoran President said that to show his government's displeasure he would declare persona-non-grata the MilGroup Commander, the Chief of the Army Section and the chief of the Air Force Section. We considered it unfortunate, but weren't overly upset since there was not to be a military assistance program for a while anyway. The Salvadorans gave our military officers a week to pack up and go home. Soon after the President's action, the MilGroup Commander came to the Ambassador and said: "Mr Ambassador, it is very unfair that I'm being declared persona-non-grata. It is not fair. Nevertheless, I would like to pay farewell calls on the chiefs of staff of the armed forces, the Minister of Defense and others. But since I can't have anything to do with them, would you grant me an exception?" The Ambassador agreed that it was [the] decent thing to do.
>
> It turned out that the MilGroup Commander, who was a colonel and a graduate of West Point, didn't speak a word of Spanish. So, he took with him a Puerto Rican officer, a major, as a translator and note-taker. When they returned from the farewell calls, the colonel instructed the major to prepare memoranda of the conversations. The major sent the drafts to the colonel, who cut them to bits so that nothing that had transpired was left in the memoranda. In fact, the MilGroup Commander put in a lot of stuff that had not transpired. The major, who was not too smart, went to his superior, who was the number two in the Army Section. That officer read the originals and the corrected versions. In the original, there were comments made by the colonel to the effect that the problem between the US and El Salvador was the American

Ambassador and his failure to perceive and support legitimate Salvadoran aspirations. Furthermore, the Ambassador's unilateral decision to suspend assistance was unwarranted. The colonel was blaming the Ambassador for everything that the US government had done to punish the Salvadorans. All that was in the originals of the memoranda of conversation. The colonel had of course scratched all of that out and had put in other stuff. The number two in the army section, who was also a West Pointer, couldn't believe what had happened; he took the two documents home, slept on them and at 7:30 the next morning, went to the Ambassador's residence with the papers. He said that his commanding officer had done this; that it was unconscionable and that he couldn't support it and thought that the Ambassador should be aware of what had transpired. The colonel was then given twenty-fours to leave.

Subsequently, the chief of staff of the Salvadoran armed forces, at a party, approached the Ambassador and said: "One thing about that war with Honduras that always confused us was your strong reaction when in fact you helped us plan the mobilization" He then proceeded to describe the activities of the American military officers, still puzzled why the Americans had helped to plan the invasion and then had cut off military assistance when it happened.

Honduran pilots assigned to La Mesa airfield returning from a combat mission during the war. From left to right, Lt. Santiago Perdomo, Lt. Edgardo Mejía, Col. Mario Chinchilla, Capt. Walter López and Capt. Carlos Aguirre. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Incredibly, Ambassador Bowdler didn't take the incident seriously and, according to Binns, he actually laughed about it. However, when the news reached the US Southern Command, its commanding general wanted to court-martial the colonel. In the end, the Ambassador decided against that on the grounds that a court martial would raise "an unnecessary uproar". He then recommended that the colonel just be put "out to pasture" and be permitted to retire in a year or so. By contrast, this incident was taken by the Hondurans as incontrovertible evidence of a larger US involvement in the conflict.[9] After the war, former Honduran Army officers published books supposedly based on official documentation which described how the US government not only financed and equipped the "fearsome" Salvadoran war machine, but also provided strategic and tactical guidance before and during the invasion campaign. The problem was that, while the Honduran military historians may have used existing documentation, their claims were made based only on statements that fitted their views. The truth is, however, that the war took the US by surprise, just like everybody else in the region, and if they provided military equipment to the Salvadorans, it was done following the anti-communist policies that were in place back then, and that had also included considerable military aid for Honduras.

Major Henríquez, the FAS Commander, was facing his own particular difficulties. The recently recruited North American combat pilots had failed to show up at Ilopango by the end of the afternoon, as had been planned. The problem was that these pilots had already been scheduled to fly close aerial support and air superiority missions the next day, hoping that they could make a difference against the FAH. Major Henríquez eventually had to ask for volunteers among his pilots so at least the close air support missions could be flown. Captains Douglas Varela and Leonel Lovo agreed to fly in the Mustangs Ils, while Captains Guillermo Cortez and Salvador Cezena volunteered to do so in the FG-1Ds. No specific targets were assigned by the FAS operations section, however, because those would be determined by the requirements of the field commanders at both fronts during the day. By 8:00 p.m., Henríquez finally dismissed his men and the mechanics went to prepare the aircraft for the upcoming sorties. Unbeknownst to all involved, a rather difficult episode of the war was upon them.

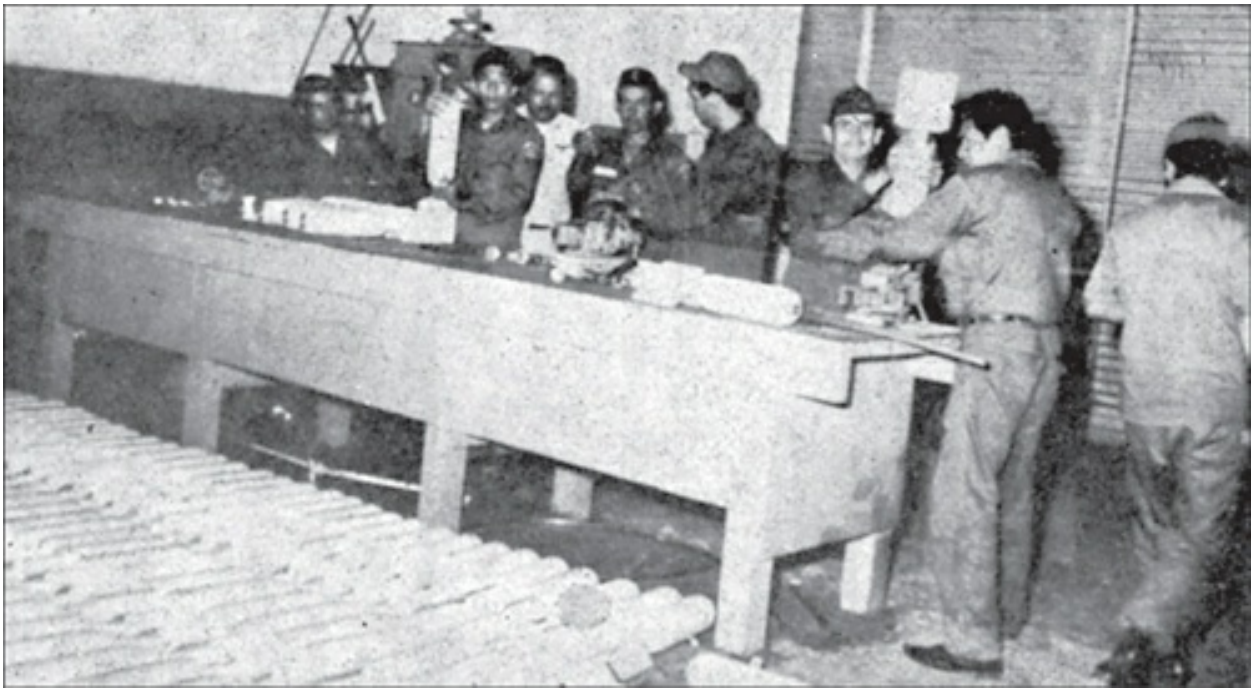
7

THE LONGEST DAY

Ten minutes after midnight, on 17 July, Guillermo Sevilla Sacasa, the Nicaraguan Foreign Affairs Minister, informed OAS Headquarters in Washington DC that the Salvadoran government was willing to negotiate. Earlier that evening, the Nicaraguan Chancellor had received a formal note from the Salvadoran Foreign Affairs Minister stating that his government would agree to a ceasefire, providing that its Honduran counterpart could guarantee the safety of the Salvadorans and their properties in Honduras. By then, Sevilla Sacasa was leading a group of seven ambassadors that the OAS had designated for mediating between the warring countries, so the international body could remain uninvolved in the awkward and potentially disastrous situation. The reason behind this decision was that, since the beginning of the hostilities, the Honduran government had been trying to convince the OAS to declare El Salvador as the aggressor, something that its members had been avoiding with all their might, because it would allow the Hondurans to invoke the Rio Treaty and force the US, and the rest of the Latin American countries, to get involved in the conflict. Obviously, such involvement could escalate, with unforeseen consequences, what was perceived as just a minor border dispute. The OAS asked Sevilla Sacasa to immediately inform the Hondurans about the Salvadorans' intentions.

Less than an hour later, at 1:00 a.m., Sevilla Sacasa received the Honduran government's response: they were not going to negotiate with the Salvadorans unless their troops were withdrawn completely from Honduran soil. Undeterred, and sensing that there was a good chance to stop the war, the Nicaraguan Chancellor summoned the rest of the ambassadors who comprised the mediating team, and set to work on a formal ceasefire proposal, to be submitted to both governments as soon as it could be drafted. Dr Tiburcio Carías Castillo, the Honduran Minister of Foreign Affairs, tried once again to convince the OAS to declare El Salvador as the aggressor, but the international body refused, saying they wanted to give Sevilla Sacasa's team a chance to finish drafting the ceasefire proposal. Ironically, while this

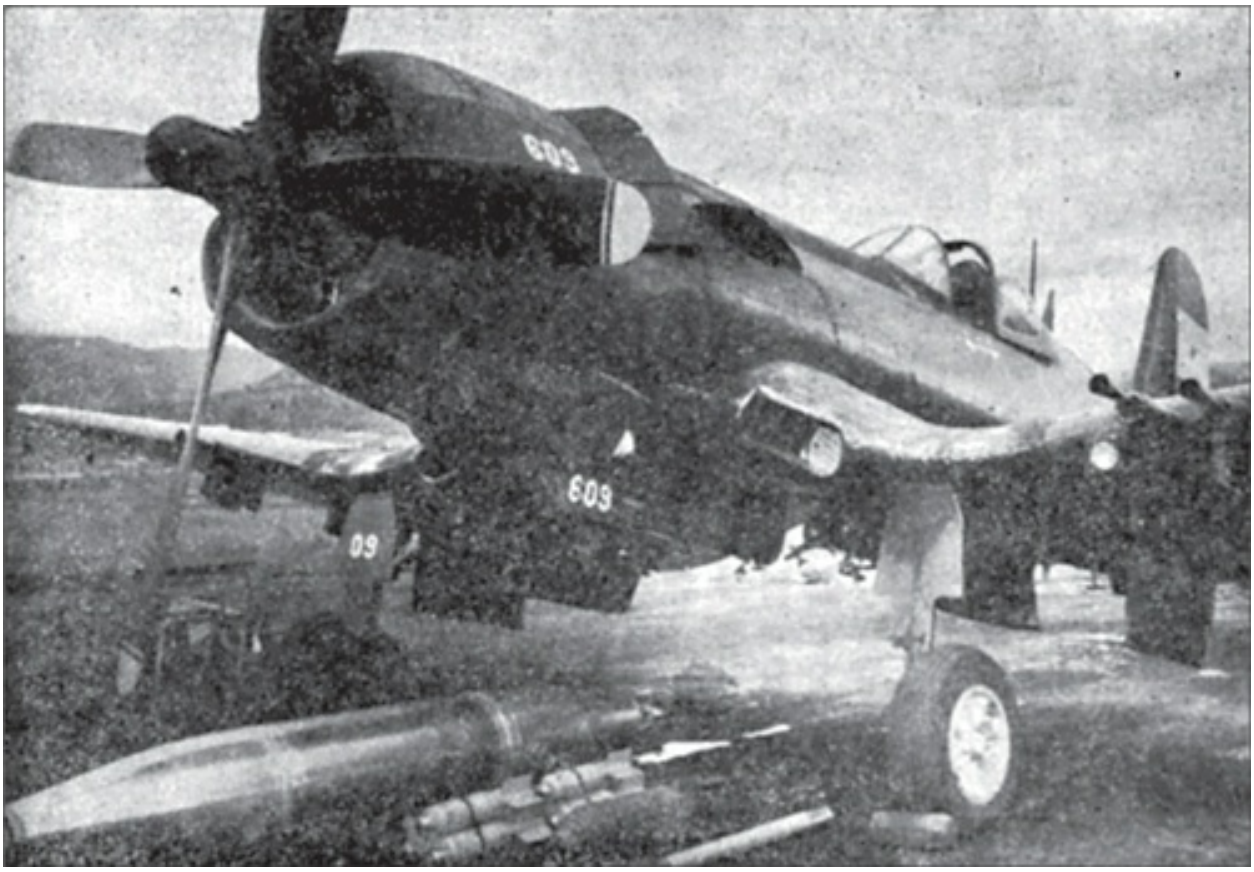
was happening, a Honduran Army convoy-packed-full of ammunition and mortar shells supplied by Nicaragua[1] was heading towards the towns of La Arada and El Carreto, both located on the Eastern front. This convoy was to resupply the combat posts that had been established in those towns, and that were expecting a major attack from the Salvadorans. Meanwhile, in the town of Estancias, in the La Paz department, the Honduran *Joaquín Rivera* Battalion had been ordered to launch reconnaissance patrols across the border[2] towards the Salvadoran villages of Poloros, Monteca and Lajitas. The objective was to verify if an offensive was being assembled in that area. In all cases, the patrols only found a few civilians going about their business, and no presence of Salvadoran troops. These patrols turned out to be the first Honduran incursions into Salvadoran territory during the war.



Armourers of the Honduran Air Force putting together the fearsome *'Piñas'* cluster bombs. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

At 5:30 a.m., the Salvadoran high command ordered the 1st and 8th Battalions, at the time stationed just outside Nueva Ocotepeque, to assemble for a final push against the Honduran defences established in the La Chicotera, Quiamol and El Moral hills, and then clear the way for a major attack against Santa Rosa de Copán. What the Salvadoran intelligence had failed to notice, however, was that almost every Honduran defensive position

east of the road from Nueva Ocotepeque towards El Moral had been reinforced with troops of the *Guardia de Honor*, including the town of El Portillo, where the advanced field command post had been established. In addition, there were several FAH forward air controllers operating in the hills that overlooked that road, who were keeping the Salvadoran troops under constant watch. These forward air controllers showed their effectiveness when, at 6:45 a.m., they directed two F4U-4s, flying from La Mesa, and a F4U-5N from Toncontín, on an airstrike against the Salvadoran troops that were assembling near Nueva Ocotepeque, delaying temporarily their advance towards El Moral and destroying two tanks, a jeep and a M35 truck. These fighters, piloted by Captains Carlos Aguirre and Francisco Zepeda, and Lieutenant Marco Rivera, also attacked with rockets the Salvadoran field command post at Nueva Ocotepeque and strafed several machine-gun nests emplaced around the town of El Poy. During one of the strafing runs, Captain Zepeda's Corsair was hit by anti-aircraft fire, but he was able to escape the area and return to Toncontín.



Vought F4U-5N, FAH-609, with the types of ordnance that it could carry. Besides the napalm

canisters, the cluster bombs – nicknamed *'Pinas'* – can be seen. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

Wreckage of the F-51D Mustang II, serialled FAS-404, which was shot down by Captain Fernando Soto on 17 July 1969. The Salvadoran pilot, Captain Douglas Varela, was killed during the dogfight. (Photo credit: Amado Aguiluz)

At the El Amatillo-Nacaome front, around 7:00 a.m., the Salvadoran artillery began shelling the locations where spotters thought that the Honduran defences were. It took them quite some time to realise that the Honduran troops had left the area, effecting a tactical retreat towards the towns of La Guacimada, Santa Lucía and La Arada, while other small units had taken positions in the hills that overlooked the Inter-American Highway and on the La Mesa hill. Once the Salvadorans were able to locate where the Hondurans defences were, several platoons of the 11th Battalion left their combat posts near Las Lajas and the El Ujuste hill, and launched a coordinated attack against the Honduran defensive posts along the Inter-American Highway with support from the artillery, which by then had relocated to El Ujuste hill and Las Lajas. Less than an hour later, the first

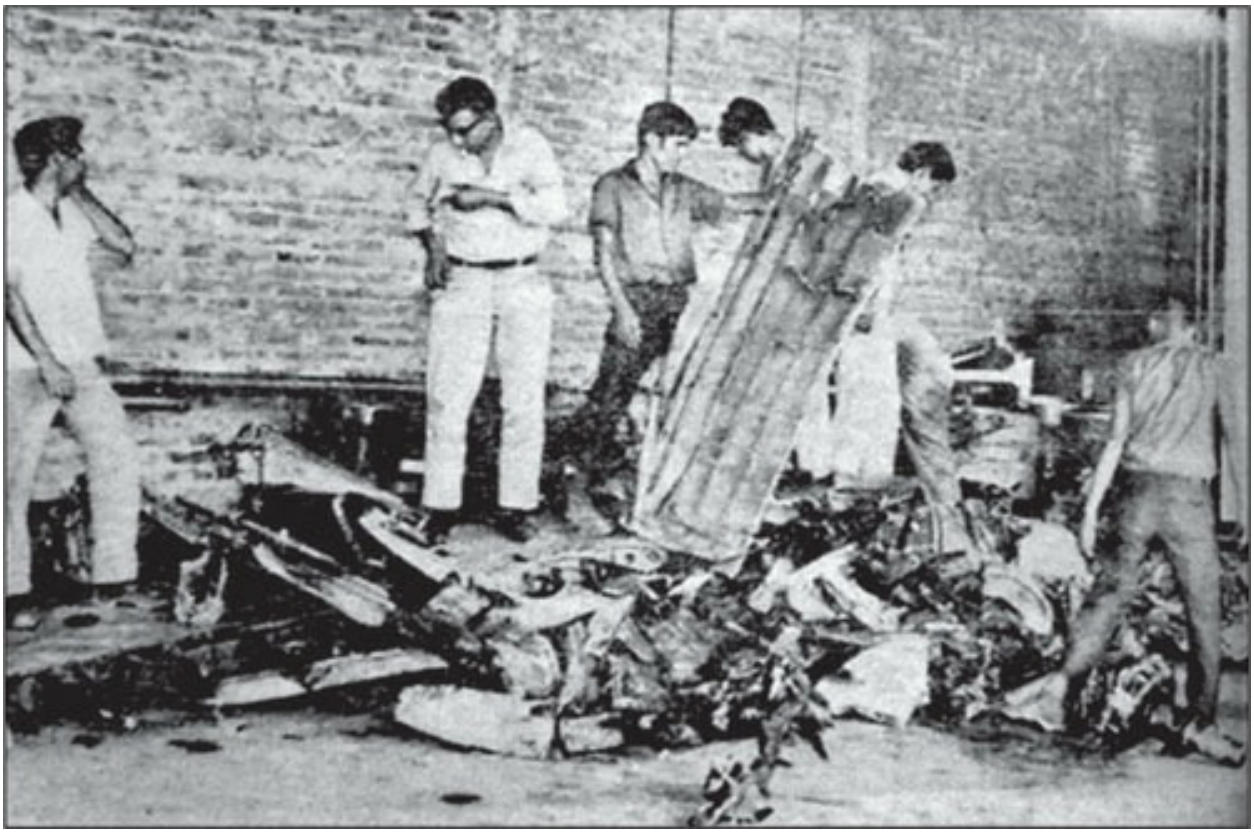
clashes took place, and despite the widespread radio-communications problems, the Hondurans were able to resist the Salvadoran advance, the situation settling into a dull exchange of artillery and machine-gun fire that lasted for most of the morning.

Back at the Western front, the first Salvadoran troops of the 1st and 8th Battalions had managed to reach the Quiamol and La Chicotera mountains and were attacking the defensive positions that the Hondurans had set up there. As the assault progressed, the defenders were ordered to abandon their combat posts and, in complete radio silence, take up positions along the hills that bordered the road to El Moral, in the San Rafael de las Matarás area. The plan was to take advantage of the steep slopes and sharp turns that the road presented in that sector, and launch an ambush on the convoy that was transporting the bulk of the 1st and 8th Battalions towards El Moral. Meanwhile, the FAH forward air controllers in the Quiamol and La Chicotera hills had noticed that the Salvadorans were trying to secure the foothills as well as the road towards El Moral in order to protect their convoy's advance. Wasting no time, they requested an airstrike, and minutes later, a flight of four F4U-4s from La Mesa showed up and began bombing and strafing the Salvadoran positions. During this air attack, the Honduran fighters used for the first time the so-called '*Pinas*'[3] (Pineapples), which were a locally designed ordnance made of six old 30lb bombs strapped together around a steel bar that could be hung from the Corsairs' bomb racks. These makeshift 'cluster bombs' proved to be lethal and caused innumerable casualties among the scared Salvadoran troops.

Captain Reynaldo Cortéz, centre, with his FG-1D at La Carrera ranch in Usulutan, El Salvador. The day after this photo was taken, Captain Cortéz was shot down by Captain Fernando Soto. (Photo credit: Salvadoran Aviation Museum)

At 10:00 a.m., Chancellor Sevilla Sacasa finally sent the ceasefire proposal to the Honduran and Salvadoran governments. The document listed a series of conditions that would have to be met by the warring countries, beginning with the cessation of hostilities at 8:00 a.m. the next day, the withdrawal of Salvadoran troops from Honduras during the following 72 hours and the agreement of both governments to ensure the safety of the Salvadorans living in Honduras and Hondurans living in El Salvador. Last, but not least, the proposal stated that a group of civilian and military observers from the neighbouring countries would be organised for making sure that both nations complied with the accord. The Honduran government agreed to the proposal immediately, but its Salvadoran counterpart refused to respond, alleging that it needed some time for making consultations. The truth was, however, that the members of the Salvadoran high command were still hoping to overturn the situation in the two battlefronts and achieve a much better negotiating

position. Little did they know that their military campaign was about to go down in flames.



Wreckage of one of the Salvadoran FG-IDs shot down by Captain Fernando Soto on 17 July. At the time this photo was taken, the remains had been transported to Ilopango, where they were kept in a hangar. (Photo credit: Via Marco Lavagnino)

On the Eastern front, around 11:00 a.m., fierce fighting was taking place along the Inter-American Highway, between the towns of La Guacimada and Santa Lucia, and in the foothills of Cerro La Mesa. The Salvadoran artillery had also intensified its attacks, and was causing several casualties among the Honduran troops. By then, the Honduran field commanders feared that they couldn't resist for much longer and desperately began requesting close air support. Half an hour later, three F4U-5Ns, flown by Major Fernando Soto Henríquez (FAH-609) and Captains Edgardo Acosta (in an unidentified Corsair) and Francisco Zepeda (FAH-605), departed Toncontín, tasked with silencing the enemy artillery. At 11:45 a.m., shortly before starting their descent over the El Amatillo area, Major Soto Henríquez ordered his pilots to check the functioning of their 20mm cannons by firing shorts burst into the air. Within seconds, Captain Zepeda reported that his weapons were jammed,

so Major Soto Henríquez ordered him to return immediately to Toncontín, while he and Acosta continued with the mission.

Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez with his Corsair FAH-609. On 17 July 1969, Captain Soto shot down three Salvadoran aircraft. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

As Captain Zepeda was setting his course back to Toncontín, two FAS Mustang Ils, piloted by Captains Douglas Varela (FAS-404) and Leonel Lovo (FAS-401), were approaching the El Amatillo area to conduct an airstrike in support of the troops of the 11th Battalion, which at that moment were engaging the Honduran advanced combat positions near Cerro La Mesa. During their descent towards the combat zone, the Salvadoran pilots spotted Zepeda's Corsair leaving the area and immediately decided to go after him. It didn't take long for Captain Zepeda to realise that he was being intercepted by enemy aircraft, and he began making violent evasive manoeuvres. At some point during the pursuit, Captain Varela managed to position himself behind Zepeda's Corsair and fired a long burst of his .50 cal machine guns. Miraculously, Zepeda dodged the rain of bullets and made a sharp turn that

the Mustang II wasn't able to follow. Captain Lovo remained behind, providing cover to Varela, while scanning the skies for the presence of any more enemy aircraft, as he was sure that the Honduran fighter was not alone. Minutes later, Varela again managed to get behind Zepeda's airplane, and once more the Honduran pilot had to make a violent manoeuvre in order to shake him off his tail. After coming out of a steep dive, Zepeda was finally able to call his companions, telling them that he was under attack. Upon hearing that Zepeda was in trouble, Soto Henríquez and Acosta jettisoned their bombs and immediately headed back to look for him. It only took them a couple of minutes to reach the area where Zepeda was being attacked, and Henríquez went straight after Varela's airplane while Acosta began pursuing Lovo. Surprisingly, the Mustang II turned out to be an easy prey due to its lack of agility. Their enormous fuel tip-tanks generated too much drag and instability, and made it very difficult for the pilot to manoeuvre during a dogfight. Major Henríquez had little trouble getting behind Varela's airplane, managing to hit its fuselage and wings repeatedly with his 20mm cannons. The Salvadoran pilot had to draw on all his flying skills to shake off Soto, making violent turns or entering into sudden steep dives. But all that was for nothing, as during one of those dives, Soto Henríquez finally managed to hit the Mustang II's engine and cockpit, setting the airplane on fire. Minutes later, Varela crashed[4] into a wooded area near the port of San Lorenzo, in Honduran territory. Captain Acosta was still going after Captain Lovo, firing his cannons repeatedly, but the Salvadoran pilot managed to elude him and escaped[5] towards the Gulf of Fonseca at very low altitude. Acosta didn't go after him, however, because at the time, Honduran pilots were forbidden from entering Salvadoran territory under any circumstances.

Vought F4U-5N Honduran Air Force serial FAH-609. In this Corsair, Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez shot down three Salvadoran aircraft. The fighter is currently preserved at the Honduran Air Museum in Tegucigalpa. (Photo credit: Carlos Planas, via Dan Hagedorn)

As is usual with everything related to this conflict, there are two different versions of the downing of Captain Varela: The Salvadoran one claims that the pilot managed to bail out safely, but was captured and assassinated by Honduran soldiers as soon as he hit the ground; the other version, as told by Major Soto, states that Varela perished in the cockpit of his Mustang II from the bullets that hit him. Whatever the case, the death of Varela delivered a heavy psychological blow to the FAS pilots and mechanics, and prompted the crumbling of their already diminished morale.

While Varela was being shot down, General Medrano and his *Guardia Nacional* column were facing their own problems. Still lost around Llano Largo, the general had sent out a patrol in order to find the way to La Labor, which by then was its main objective. However, soldiers of the Lempira and 3rd Battalions managed to locate the Salvadoran patrol and promptly attacked it, forcing the troops to flee the area. Later on, the Hondurans engaged the main *Guardia Nacional* column and, again, the Salvadorans were forced to retreat. After losing the Hondurans, who were still in pursuit of his column, General Medrano radioed the Field Command Post at Nueva Ocotepeque saying that he was advancing towards La Labor and, if possible, Santa Rosa de Copán. This message was misinterpreted by the field commanders, who thought that the road between El Moral and La Labor had been cleared of

enemy opposition by Medrano's men. Thus, they ordered the 1st and 4th Infantry Battalions to mobilize towards El Moral, and from there to La Labor in order to join Medrano's force. By midday, the long convoy transporting the Salvadoran soldiers reached the steep slopes near El Moral, and very slowly began negotiating the sharp curves of the road. It was at this point that the Hondurans launched their attack from the hills overlooking the road, which caught the Salvadorans completely off-guard. The heavy machine-gun and mortar fire immediately caused the first casualties, forcing the Salvadorans to abandon their vehicles and seek shelter wherever they could. Minutes later, the Hondurans blocked the road towards Nueva Ocotepeque to prevent any attempt to retreat by the Salvadorans, and began requesting La Mesa airbase for an airstrike. During the following 45 minutes, the Hondurans decimated the Salvadoran troops being transported by the convoy, destroying many of its vehicles and artillery pieces. However, it was the air attack, carried out by the F4U-4s serialled FAH-612 and FAH-614, that sealed their fate. Flown by Captain Carlos Aguirre and Lieutenant Marco Rivera, the Corsairs attacked the convoy with four 100lb bombs and several rockets, destroying many of the M35 trucks and jeeps. Subsequently, the pair of fighters spent quite some time strafing the enemy troops, forcing the survivors to flee the area. According to some accounts, many of these survivors were able to reach Nueva Ocotepeque by foot, but didn't stop there and continued towards the Salvadoran border. By the end of the combat, it was estimated that there were more than 30 Salvadoran casualties, while most of the convoy's vehicles had been destroyed. This ambush, called the Battle of San Rafael de las Matarás,[6] is considered the major victory in the history of the Honduran Army, although it was somewhat diminished when a shortage of ammunition forced the Honduran troops to stop their pursuit of the Salvadorans withdrawing to Nueva Ocotepeque.

Back at the El Amatillo-Nacaome front, Honduran aircraft were still trying to silence the Salvadoran artillery. Around 1:00 p.m., a FAH C-47 (FAH-306) attacked enemy positions located on the El Ujuste hill, dropping on them no less than fifty 30lb bombs. The C-47 was followed by two F4U-5Ns that also attacked the positions relentlessly. Then it was the turn of the AT-6s and T-28s, which besides bombing the enemy artillery positions, provided close air support to the ground forces resisting the Salvadoran attacks. By then, the Salvadoran field commanders had received intelligence indicating that the Hondurans would destroy the bridge over the Goascorán River in

order to cutoff the supply line from El Salvador. As this could pose a difficult logistical situation, they requested the FAS for close air support to protect the bridge. Thus, at 2:00 p.m., Captains Reynaldo Cortéz and Salvador Cezeña took off from Ilopango in two FG-1Ds and headed towards the El Amatillo area, which they reached within minutes. The two pilots spent some time flying over the bridge and surrounding areas, looking for any Honduran presence, but failed to spot any. After making sure that the bridge was not compromised, the pilots decided to turn around and headed back to base.

The jamming of the 20mm cannons of the Honduran F4U-5Ns was a constant problem during the initial stages of the conflict. It wasn't until 17 July that the mechanics found the source of the problem: some British-manufactured projectiles, acquired shortly before the beginning of the war, were 1mm thicker than those manufactured in the US. (Photo credit: Carlos Planas via Dan Hagedorn)

At that precise moment, three FAH F4U-5Ns, piloted by Major Soto (FAH-609) and Captains Acosta (again in an unidentified fighter) and Zepeda (FAH-605), were descending over the El Amatillo sector to continue the attack on the Salvadoran artillery positions. As was mandatory, shortly before

entering the area of operations, Soto ordered his pilots to check their 20mm cannons, and once again Captain Zepeda discovered that his weapons were jammed. Dismayed, Soto ordered him to return to Toncontín immediately while he and Acosta completed the mission. A few minutes later, Major Soto caught a glimpse of the two FAS FG-1Ds heading for the border after having departed the Goascoran bridge area, and, without breaking radio silence, signalled Acosta about their presence. In a split-second decision, the Honduran pilots went after the Salvadoran fighters, trying to catch-up with them before they left Honduran airspace. Unaware that they were being followed, the Salvadoran pilots soon crossed the border and headed towards Ilopango.

At this point, Major Soto decided to disobey the orders he had received about not entering Salvadoran territory and crossed the border too, approaching the enemy Corsairs while on a rapid climb. Within minutes, the Honduran major reached a shooting position behind Captain Cezeñas FG-1D and immediately fired his four cannons, setting the plane on fire[7] and forcing Captain Cezeña to bail out. At that moment, Captain Cortéz realised that they were being attacked and quickly manoeuvred to position himself behind Major Soto's Corsair, managing to hit several times the wing of the Honduran F4U-5N. Major Soto, trusting that Acosta was covering him and would take care of the Salvadoran airplane chasing him, began evasive manoeuvres but without attempting to position himself behind his attacker. After two minutes, however, and much to his horror, Soto discovered that Acosta wasn't covering him, so he immediately made a quick, tight turn, taking advantage of the power of his airplane, and placed himself behind Cortéz, in a shooting position, but was unable to centre him in his gun sight. Following a few minutes of intense pursuit and violent manoeuvring, Soto finally managed to set up his adversary in his gun sight and fired several bursts that struck the fuselage and cockpit of the Salvadoran FG-1D. Cortéz, who had been wounded by the shots, repeatedly attempted to evade Soto's strafing, but any action he could have taken was neutralized by a long burst from Soto's cannons, which hit the Salvadoran Corsair's engine and wing. The turns and evasive actions of Cortéz's airplane soon became slower and less pronounced, and Soto took advantage of this situation to deliver the *coup de-grace*. Within seconds, Cortéz's airplane disintegrated amid a furious explosion,[8] since at the beginning of the dogfight, the pilot had forgotten to depressurize his fuel tanks, and these blew up when struck by Soto's rounds.

When it was all over, Major Soto located Cezeña's parachute at an altitude of 2,000ft, slowly descending to the ground, and made a pass alongside him trying to determine if he was Acosta, as he feared that his wingman had been shot-down. Cezeña thought that the approaching fighter was Cortéz's, coming up victorious after the dogfight. It took Cezeña just a couple of seconds to realise that the Corsair was Honduran, and that it was Cortéz who had been shot down. A few minutes later, Soto departed the area and went looking for Acosta as he returned to Honduran airspace. Captain Acosta had witnessed the violent combat that had taken place below him, but due to a radio malfunction, he had been unable to communicate with Major Soto. To add to his problems, he discovered that two Salvadoran Mustang IIs were following him at a short distance,[9] whose pilots seemed to be just waiting for the right moment to pounce on him. A tense observation game followed, during which the Salvadoran pilots followed every move Acosta made. Finally, and taking advantage of what seemed like a distraction, the Honduran captain started an inverted dive and managed to escape the area, without being followed by the Salvadoran airplanes. Less than an hour later, Acosta arrived in Toncontín unharmed, a few minutes behind Major Soto. Once there, both pilots were informed that the FAH mechanics had finally found the root of the problems with the 20mm cannons installed on some of the F4U-5Ns. It happened that some British-manufactured shells, acquired shortly before the beginning of the war, were 1mm thicker than those manufactured in the USA. In the brand-new cannons, like those installed in Zepeda's airplane (FAH-605), where the barrel had not been worn by firing, the British projectiles jammed. The FAH mechanics quickly went to the lathes and removed the troublesome additional millimetre[10] from all the British-made projectiles, and soon after, all the F4U-5Ns were once again declared combat-ready.

Back at Ilopango, news of the aircraft being shot down was taken badly by the FAS personnel, not only due to the loss of two excellent pilots and brothers in arms, but also because they had lost the chance to acquire aerial superiority against the Hondurans. At this point, the FAS' offensive element only counted two FG-1Ds and three Mustang IIs as active, and the remaining combat pilots had made clear that they wouldn't be flying them, which had placed the FAS Commander in a rather difficult position. The run of bad luck did not end there, however, since around 3:00 p.m., the field commander of the 6th Infantry Battalion informed Ilopango that an FG-1D, piloted by

Captain Mario Echeverría, had been shot down by Salvadoran antiaircraft batteries emplaced near the port of Cutuco, in the Gulf of Fonseca, during a friendly fire incident. Captain Echeverría had managed to bail out safely over Salvadoran territory, but upon hitting the ground, he had been captured by a group of furious civilians who thought that he was a Honduran pilot, and almost killed him. It wasn't until the poor captain was taken to the La Unión military detachment that he was properly identified and then rushed back to the Salvadoran capital.

Around 4:00 p.m., just as Major Salvador Henríquez was facing one of the lowest hours of his career, Chuck Lyford, Ben Hall and Bob Love, the North American pilots who had been hired to fly in combat, arrived at Ilopango on a PanAm flight.[11] This was perceived by the stoic FAS Commander as the arrival of the much needed 'cavalry, and he quickly set off to welcome them, accompanied by Archie Baldocchi. According to Lyford's own account, their arrival and incorporation into the Salvadoran Air Force was treated with the utmost secrecy. First, they were taken to a situation room located next to the Operations Section of the Ilopango airbase, where they were brought up to date about the conflict by Major Henríquez and the Air Operations Officer, a Captain Regalado. Then they were issued with fake Salvadoran (and even OAS observer) IDs and appointed captains of the air force.[12] Shortly before letting them go, Major Henríquez ordered them to avoid talking or even making eye contact with anyone, civilian or military. This turned out to be problematic right from the start, since many local and foreign press correspondents were running around Ilopango. Lyford soon ran into a TV network reporter he knew and with whom he had shared a flight just a week before. The reporter tried to stop Lyford and talk, but the pilot shook him off rudely and kept going.

As soon as the impromptu meeting was adjourned, the three North American pilots were taken to the flight line so they could select the airplanes they would be flying. There, they realised that only one FG-1D and the three remaining Mustang IIs were available. They looked over the planes and decided to pick the three Mustang IIs, these being the machines serialled FAS-401, FAS-403 and FAS-405. Shortly after, they moved the airplanes to Baldocchi's hangar, located in the eastern sector of the airport, where they established their base of operations in order to stay far from any prying eyes. What followed has been described by Lyford in his article published in the December 2012 *Flight Journal* magazine:

After inspecting our birds, we reported that the airplanes required several modifications before combat. The large fuel tanks permanently installed on the wingtips were removed: We needed all the speed we could get and didn't need extra fuel in our small operations area. More important, we needed to install some sort of gunsight. We also insisted on adding armor plate behind our seats. The thin aluminum seats wouldn't have stopped a well-shot arrow, let alone the 20mm cannon rounds from the FAH's F4U-5s.

Because of my racing experience, I knew we could get away with raising the boost on the engines from 61 to 80 inches. In a bind, with the transport banks, those engines could pull the extra power for a brief time without damage. To protect the engines, we set the oil pressure up about 20 pounds and added toluline to the fuel. We lacked time to install water injection. I had flown the Corsair and knew it was a great fighter, especially the F4U-4s and '5s with the big P&W Double Wasp engines with water injection. The Hondurans had both models. I knew the 'Hog' turned well with its power and big wing, especially at the lower altitudes. I also knew the Mustang was faster, and with energy would climb like a rocket. Avoiding a turning contest in combat is essential, unless one gets caught, and we planned to remain at altitude hoping to drop down in slashing attacks using the Mustang's great speed and climb. Since the beginning of the war a single Honduran Corsair had notched up three victories and we intended to even the score for the Mustang in what history would record as the last engagement of prop-driven fighters. Work continued on the mods throughout the night, and with a lot of help we were able to finish by 5:00 a.m., including some quickly-made fiberglass wingtips.

The Salvadoran government hired three North American pilots to fly combat missions during the war. From left to right: Bob Love, Ben Hall, Chuck Lyford (standing) and their mechanic, Chuck Hanssen. (Photo credit: Chuck Lyford)

Baldocchi was already committed to rebuild the FAS from scratch. By then, he had managed to locate and purchase – on behalf of the Salvadoran government – no less than seven 'stock' North American P-51Ds. However, due to the embargo that the US had imposed, the pilots charged with their delivery to El Salvador were having problems avoiding the authorities, and by 17 July, many of them had made 'technical stops' in such unlikely places as the Dominican Republic and Haiti in order to disguise their final destination. But Baldocchi's problems would not end with the arrival of these fighters, since they had been acquired from civilian sources in the US and did

not have any armament installed. Thus, it would be necessary to come up with enough machine guns and bomb racks in order to militarize them. In any case, and for any practical purposes, the FAS as an air arm, continued to be paralysed.

On the diplomatic front, the Salvadoran government finally notified the OAS and Sevilla Sacasa's group that they would agree to the ceasefire proposal on the condition that the period for withdrawing their troops from Honduran soil could be extended to 96 hours due to the complexity of such a task. In addition, the Salvadorans stated that they would wait for the Honduran response until 10:00 p.m., so the ceasefire could be enforced early the next morning. Three hours later, around 7:00 p.m., two members of Sevilla Sacasa's group arrived in Tegucigalpa to inform López Arellano about the Salvadoran agreement to end the war and the conditions they were asking. At that moment, the Honduran president was in a meeting with the Army's high command reviewing the latest developments at the battle-fronts, which was promptly cancelled. López Arellano quickly summoned his cabinet and ordered his ministers to start working on a document defining the terms under which the safety of the Salvadorans living in Honduras would be assured. Then, the Honduran Foreign Minister informed the OAS and Sevilla Sacasa's group that they would accept the ceasefire proposal, but that they had to finish the document first.

While all this was taking place, the Honduran combat posts established around San Marcos Ocotepeque reported that Salvadoran troops were advancing towards the town, and requested close air support. They didn't know it then, but these enemy troops were in fact members of General Medrano's column still trying to reach La Labor. However, after being engaged by the Honduran defenders, they had to retreat back to Plan del Rancho, where they became lost once again. Not far from there, the Hondurans finally managed to secure the La Chicotera hill and the mountains around Quiamol, thus preventing any possible Salvadoran advance towards El Moral, El Portillo, La Labor and, eventually, Santa Rosa de Copán. It wasn't until then that the Salvadoran Army's high command began realising the delicate situation that their troops were facing at the Nueva Ocotepeque front. This, coupled with the virtual annihilation of the air force and the lack of progress in the El Amatillo area, made them consider for the very first time the possibility of defeat. President Sánchez Hernández seemed to have other plans though, since around 10:00 p.m., when representatives of the OAS tried

to reach him and let him know that the Hondurans had agreed to the ceasefire proposal, he refused to answer the phone. It wasn't until 30 minutes later that he picked up, only to let Sevilla Sacasa know that he couldn't accept the agreement,[13] because he had been contacted too late.

8

MAXIMUM EFFORTS

The early hours of 18 July found the Salvadoran high command still trying to come to terms with the complicated situation that the troops were facing on the Nueva Ocotepeque and El Amatillo fronts. Some officers were eager to call off the disastrous campaign, but the majority, including President Sánchez Hernández, wanted to give it one last try, a ‘maximum effort’ of sorts, aimed at capturing as many towns as possible before accepting the ceasefire proposal. The idea behind this desperate move was, incredibly, the incorporation of the occupied territories into El Salvador to create a ‘vital space’ into which the thousands of returnees could be relocated. In that way, the wealthy landowners wouldn’t see their land compromised in case the government was pressed to implement an agrarian reform.

Thus, around 2:00 a.m., the Salvadoran field commanders received a new set of orders. On the Nueva Ocotepeque front, the 1st and 8th Infantry Battalions, as well as General Medrano’s column, would launch an all-out offensive aimed at capturing the town of La Labor. On the El Amatillo front, the 4th and 11th Infantry Battalions, supported by artillery, would be tasked with the capture of the towns of La Arada, Llano Grande and El Carreto. How these missions would be accomplished was anyone’s guess, since all the combat units were running dangerously low on ammunition and supplies. Additionally, after the major setback at San José de las Matarás and the lack of progress at El Amatillo, the troops’ morale was really low, to the point that many soldiers were considering desertion after realising that the military adventure was going down the drain.

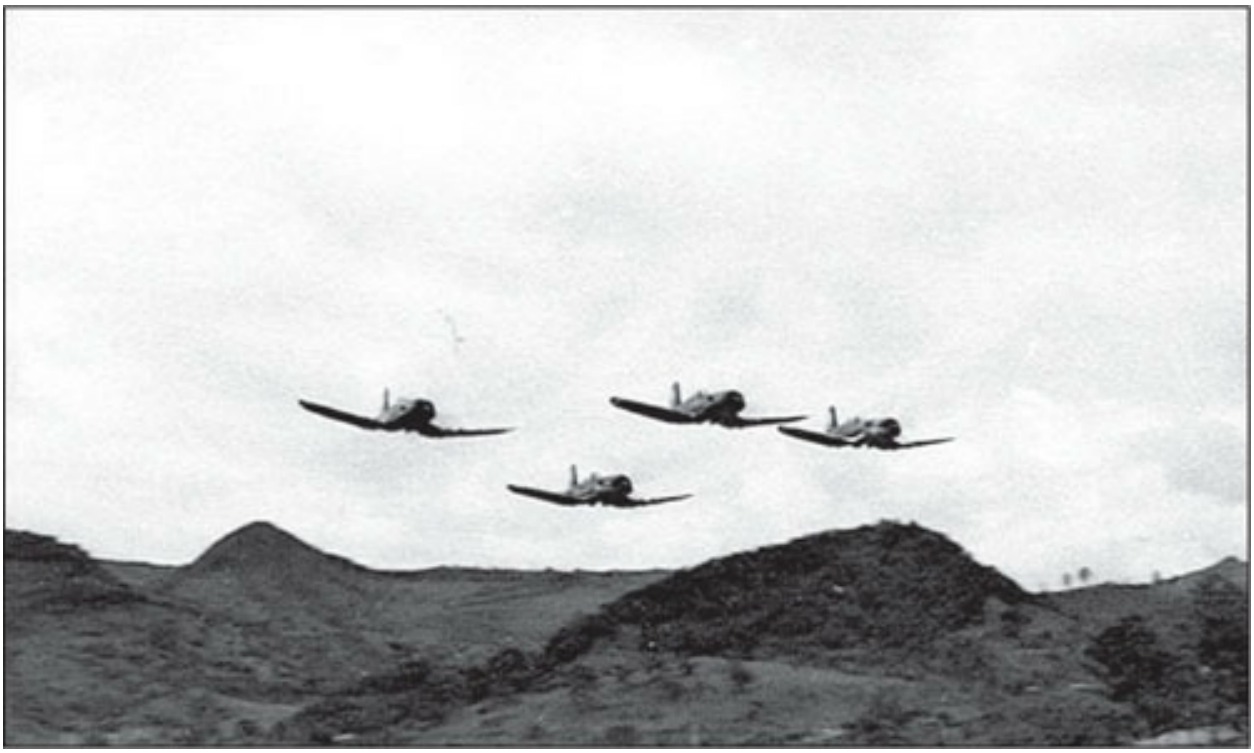
A beautiful study of three Honduran F4U-4s at La Mesa airfield in San Pedro Sula. (Photo credit: Gen. Edgardo Mejía, via the Honduran Air Museum)

Honduran civilian airplanes, like this Cessna 18A, played an important role during the war, mostly conducting liaison and reconnaissance missions over both battlefronts. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

The T-28As of the Honduran Air Force, together with the SNJs and T-6Gs, flew several close air support missions during the 'maximum effort' launched on 18 July. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Meanwhile, at Tegucigalpa, Colonel Soto Cano was trying – yet again – to convince the Honduran high command to authorise launching new ‘strategic’ bombing missions,[1] not only against Ilopango and the dispersal airfields in order to destroy what was left of the Salvadoran Air Force, but against the ports and their fuel storage tanks. If it wasn’t done, the colonel reasoned, the Salvadorans would still be able to continue the fight for at least two weeks, which wasn’t sustainable for the Honduran Army due to its own ammunition and supplies shortages. As had happened before, the officers comprising the high command quickly dismissed Soto Cano’s idea, and instead ordered him to prepare the Honduran Air Force for its own ‘maximum effort, aimed at pushing the Salvadorans back on both fronts, and eventually bringing the war to an end. For once, and contrary to what had been the norm, the Honduran high command was placing all its bets on the use of airpower. Less than an

hour later, FAH mechanics at Toncontín and La Mesa began loading with bombs virtually every Corsair, Trojan and Texan available, while the pilots were briefed about the upcoming air campaign.



During the 'maximum effort', launched on 18 July, the Honduran Air Force sent its six F4U-5Ns on a bombing mission over the El Amatillo front, which effectively silenced the Salvadoran artillery. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

At Managua in Nicaragua, Chancellor Sevilla Sacasa was on the phone with the President of the OAS Consulting Body, informing him about the activities conducted so far by the team of ambassadors and the Salvadoran government's reticence to agree to the ceasefire proposal. Convinced that there wasn't any other way to end the war but to get the Consulting Body involved, Sevilla Sacasa requested an urgent meeting, during which it would formally adopt the resolutions based on the proposal made to the warring countries. The idea was to begin exerting diplomatic pressure on the Salvadorans in order to reach a ceasefire as soon as possible. In the end, the President of the Consulting Body agreed to have the meeting, which was scheduled for 8:00 a.m..

North American T-28A, Honduran Air Force serial FAH-214. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

Vought F4U-5Ns FAH-609 and FAH-604, flying over Tegucigalpa. Note the 'kill marks' painted below the cockpit of FAH-609, which was Captain Fernando Soto's airplane. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

At the break of dawn, a Honduran reconnaissance platoon, coming from the El Moral hills, arrived in the San José de las Matarás area, the very place where the Salvadorans had been ambushed the day before. It was only then that the true outcome of the combat was revealed:[2] more than 80 dead soldiers were scattered around the area, with the wreckage of a pair of jeeps, seven civilian trucks, two M35s and six buses strewn over the road. After scouting the area, the Hondurans managed to pick up a 37mm anti-tank cannon, more than 40 Heckler & Koch G-3 rifles, two 75mm recoilless rifles, three radios, a couple of maps and a handful of crates containing different types of ammunition that the Salvadorans had left behind. In the process, 15 Salvadoran soldiers were captured, many of them wounded or too weak to even stand up.

Shortly after 5:00 a.m., the Salvadoran Army's 'maximum effort' was set in motion. It began on the El Amatillo front with heavy artillery and mortar fire against the Honduran positions established along the Inter-American Highway, towards La Arada and Llano Grande. Fearing that the barrage

would be followed by an all-out attack, the Hondurans took up defensive positions, while calling out for airstrikes. Meanwhile, near Cololaca, on the Nueva Ocotepeque front, Honduran forward air controllers had located a large column of the Salvadoran Army advancing towards San Marcos Ocotepeque. Led by Captain José Rafael Fabián, these men had orders to reinforce General Medrano's column, which by then was already attacking the Honduran defensive posts near La Labor. Facing an extremely difficult situation, the field commander at San Marcos Ocotepeque deployed a couple of platoons in order to delay the arrival of the Salvadoran reinforcements.

The Douglas C-47s of the Honduran Air Force also flew in combat missions during the 'maximum effort' on 18 July. These venerable transports were tasked with bombing the Salvadoran artillery positions on the El Amatillo front. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Museum)

A truly memorable photograph of pilots and ground personnel of the Honduran Air Force at Toncontín Airbase. Standing in the centre is the FAH Commander, Enrique Soto Cano, with Colonel José Serra to his left and Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez to his right. (Photo credit: Honduran Air Force)

At 6:15 a.m., three FAH F4U-5Ns from Toncontín, flown by Major Oscar Colíndres, and Captains Fernando Soto and Francisco Zepeda, arrived over the road from Cololaca towards San Marcos Ocotepeque and began dropping AN-M64 500lb bombs and strafing the column headed by Captain Fabián. Within minutes, the three Corsairs managed to disperse the scared Salvadoran troops, who soon retreated back into the mountains near Tomalá. Fifteen minutes later, the fighters descended over Llano Largo and began strafing General Medrano's troops, effectively stopping their attack on the defence posts emplaced south of the town. Troops of the Honduran 3rd Military Zone then managed to route them back to the foothills of El Ingenio, where General Medrano became lost once again. By then, it was more than evident to the Salvadoran high command that all chance of capturing La Labor or retaking San Marcos Ocotepeque had vanished completely. Thus, the units operating in the area were ordered to stop their advance and hold their positions. However, these orders came a little too late for a column that was attacking the Honduran defence posts established in the southern part of La

Chicotera hill. A Cessna 185, piloted by 2nd Lieutenant Oscar Soza, located them and immediately began marking targets with smoke grenades for a pair of FAH F4U-4s that were arriving from La Mesa and a F4U-5N coming from Toncontín. Flown by Captains Edgardo Acosta and Carlos Aguirre, and Lieutenant Marco Tulio Rivera, the three Corsairs promptly strafed and rocketed the Salvadoran troops, dispersing them in a matter of minutes.

Lieutenant Colonel Arnaldo Alvarado Silva, the Honduran Theatre Commander of the Nueva Ocotepeque front, riding on a captured Salvadoran jeep near El Portillo. (Photo credit: Via César Elvir Sierra)

By 7:00 a.m., virtually all available FAH aircraft were in the air, some of them flying patrol missions over important towns like San Pedro Sula, Puerto Cortés, Tela and La Ceiba along the Caribbean coast, while others were conducting reconnaissance missions over the two battle fronts, looking for any Salvadoran activity that could pose a threat. The Honduran Army had launched reconnaissance patrols across the border, in the Polorós sector, looking for enemy troops and destroying many airstrips that could be used for resupplying the Salvadoran units operating in the Caridad-Aramecina area. Strangely, these patrols failed to encounter any Salvadoran military presence in that region, and soon after headed back to their combat posts near the towns of Mercedes de Oriente and Matapalo. Some kilometres to the north-west, at Sabanetas, the 2nd Infantry Battalion received orders to launch reconnaissance patrols across the border,[3] towards Perquín and Arambala, but the battalion commander doubted the authenticity of the radio transmissions because Salvadoran radio operators had been very active during the last couple of days, trying to trick them into attacking their own positions. At 8:00 a.m., the Honduran high command found out about the delay in launching these missions, and Captain Fonseca López, the battalion's Intelligence Officer, was ordered to proceed to Tegucigalpa in order to explain what was happening.

Chuck Lyford, in the cockpit, and Bob Love, finishing the installation of a makeshift gun-sight on one of the Salvadoran F-51D Mustang IIs. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

At 8:15 a.m., Chancellor Sevilla Sacasa phoned the Salvadoran Foreign Relations Minister, Francisco Guerrero, to inform him that the OAS Consulting Body had formally adopted the ceasefire proposal drafted by his team, and that it was intending to apply diplomatic and economic sanctions if it wasn't accepted by El Salvador. Guerrero, once again trying to buy time, replied that the Salvadoran government didn't have any objections about reaching a ceasefire, but that they would not be withdrawing troops from the occupied territories as it would compromise the safety of the Salvadorans still living in Honduras. Shortly before ending the call, the minister stated that they were drafting a set of recommendations that the Salvadoran government wanted incorporated into the ceasefire proposal.

When the news about the call between Sevilla Sacasa and Guerrero reached Tegucigalpa, the Honduran high command ordered Colonel Soto Cano to step up the airstrikes on both fronts in order to discourage any Salvadoran advance. At this point, it was feared that when the imminent ceasefire was enforced, the territory already occupied by the Salvadorans could be lost. Hence, at 10:00 a.m., two FAH F4U-4s from La Mesa, piloted by Captain Aguirre and Lieutenant Rivera, and a F4U-5N from Toncontín flown by Major Soto, began attacking the Salvadoran combat posts emplaced around Nueva Ocotepeque and along the road from the provincial city to El Poy. Directed by a Cessna 185 flown by 2nd Lieutenant Soza and in coordination with a forward air controller, the Corsairs managed to hit with napalm bombs and rockets most of the Salvadoran positions. They also strafed a column of the 1st Infantry Battalion that was returning from La Chicotera after attacking the Honduran posts established there, destroying many of its vehicles and leaving several soldiers dead or wounded.

At 10:30 a.m., four FAH F4U-5Ns from Toncontín, led by Major Colíndres, descended over the El Amatillo front, bombed the Salvadoran artillery positions emplaced on the Diente Blanco hill and strafed the troops advancing towards La Arada along the Inter- American Highway. During one of the bombing runs, a Corsair accidentally dropped a 500lb bomb very close to the field command post, the explosion nearly killing the Intelligence officer and wounding a medic. Minutes later, forward air controllers operating near Goascoran vectored the Corsairs against the Salvadoran combat posts established on the outskirts of the town, which the aircraft destroyed with outstanding precision.

Chuck Lyford and the other North American pilots spent most of 18 July aligning the Salvadoran Mustangs' machine guns to the gun sights they had manufactured the night before, as well as finishing the installation of the armour plates in the cockpits. This prevented them from flying any combat missions during the last day of the war. Note that, at this point, the fuel tip tanks had been removed from the aircraft. (Photo credit: Chuck Lyford)

By then, the Hondurans were sure that the feared Salvadoran offensive on the El Amatillo front wouldn't materialize, thanks in part to the constant airstrikes launched by the FAH aircraft. However, due to the impending ammunition shortage, the field commanders were unable to assemble a coherent operation to rout the Salvadorans out of the country. Hence, the order was to resist until the aviators could destroy the enemy. How long this would take was anyone's guess, but at least they were willing to hold out. In contrast, at El Portillo, where the field command post of the Nueva Ocotepeque front was established, the Honduran Theatre Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Arnaldo Alvarado, had decided to take the initiative by attacking General Medrano's column and retaking Nueva Ocotepeque. As a precaution, Lieutenant Colonel Alvarado ordered the reinforcement of the combat posts around El Portillo to prevent any surprise attack, before launching the offensive.

By mid-morning, the OAS began pressuring the Salvadoran government to agree to the ceasefire proposal. Far from convincing the president, the pressure encouraged him to step up efforts to seize as much Honduran territory as possible. Hence, Sánchez Hernández summoned the Army high command to review the situation at the battlefronts and the possibility of continuing with the 'final offensive'. Perhaps to no one's surprise, the picture that emerged from the meeting wasn't very encouraging. The combat units

operating on the Nueva Ocotepeque front had been pinned down by the Hondurans, and the only posts holding out were those established at Nueva Ocotepeque and El Pedregal. General Medrano's column, on the other hand, had been able to reach Llano Largo once again, and was requesting reinforcements in order to attack and seize La Labor. Captain Fabián's unit had regrouped near Cololaca and would attempt another attack on San Marcos Ocotepeque, provided that his unit could be reinforced too. At the El Amatillo front, the FAH airstrikes had prevented any possibility of advance, and the artillery had sustained heavy loses. In the end, it was decided to attempt a final push in the El Amatillo area with the objective of securing the towns already occupied and then seize Nacaome. For accomplishing this important mission, a force composed of troops from the 4th and 11th Infantry Battalions, as well as civilians from the ORDEN organisation, began assembling at Santa Rosa de Lima. On the Nueva Ocotepeque front, the main objective would be to seize and secure the towns of La Labor and San Marcos Ocotepeque. For this, General Medrano's column, as well as Captain Fabián's unit, would be reinforced with a couple of reserve platoons that were awaiting orders at Plan del Rancho.

At 12:30 p.m., the first trucks transporting the troops who had assembled at Santa Rosa de Lima crossed the bridge over the Goascorán River, albeit under the constant watch of a couple of Honduran forward air controllers who were operating near El Amatillo. Sensing that this was the beginning of a large offensive, the forward air controllers immediately began requesting an airstrike, while the combat posts at La Guacimada, Santa Lucía and La Arada were alerted about an incoming attack. An hour later, three FAH F4U-5Ns, led by Major Colíndres, descended over the area and bombed the trucks, effectively stopping their advance. The Corsairs then spent more than 15 minutes strafing the Salvadoran troops who were trying desperately to escape into the surrounding hills. Around 2:00 p.m., an even larger convoy departed Santa Rosa de Lima and headed towards El Amatillo. Much to the Hondurans' dismay, the feared 'final offensive' was taking shape.

Meanwhile, at Llano Largo, a Honduran reconnaissance patrol had managed to locate and ambush General Medrano's column while trying to reach La Labor. Within minutes, other combat units arrived in the area and began attacking the Salvadoran troops, who quickly ran for cover in the surrounding hills. An hour later, a flight of three FAH F4U-4s, led by Captain Aguirre, arrived in the area but failed to make contact with the forward air

controllers on the ground. Unable to determine the exact position of the friendly forces, Aguirre opted to establish a pattern around the area, while trying to get in touch with the forward air controllers. Eventually, a Salvadoran radio-operator managed to contact him and tried to vector the Corsairs against the Honduran troops, but Aguirre wisely decided to call off the airstrike and headed back to base.[4]

At this point, the OAS' Consulting Body was still in a meeting aimed at reviewing and hopefully reaching approval of Sevilla Sacasa's ceasefire proposal. At first, it seemed that the members couldn't agree on a single thing, but after several consultations, they managed to approve the four resolutions that comprised Sevilla Sacasa's proposal. The document, to be signed by the presidents of the warring countries, mandated the enforcement of a ceasefire at 10:00 p.m. that same day, the formation of a commission to oversee the withdrawal of the Salvadoran troops from Honduran territories during the following 96 hours, the promise of both government to guarantee the safety and the lives of the Salvadorans in Honduras and the Hondurans in El Salvador, and the end of the propaganda campaign that the press in both countries had launched. Minutes later, the Nicaraguan chancellor formally notified the governments of the warring countries that the ceasefire proposal now had the backing of the OAS.

While this was happening, and to further complicate the diplomatic scenario, the Honduran high command ordered the 2nd Infantry Battalion, stationed at Sabanetas, to launch an operation aimed at seizing the Salvadoran towns of Arambala and Perquín. Fortunately, no opposition was encountered along their advance, and three hours later, the mission had been accomplished without any casualties. As expected, the OAS' Consulting Body took a very dim view of this action and rushed to demand the withdrawal of these Honduran troops from Salvadoran soil.

At Tegucigalpa, the Army high command met again to review the latest developments. Intelligence reports indicated that the Salvadoran troops at Nueva Ocotepeque, while still holding out at their combat posts, had lost their morale and were not fighting anymore. Thus, in order to rout them out of the country, it was decided that the 2nd Infantry Battalion would be airlifted to reinforce the units stationed at El Moral, Quiamol and the Chicotera hill, from where they would launch a heavy attack aimed at retaking the provincial city. Another aspect that attracted the officers' attention was the fierce resistance that General Medrano's column was

putting up at Llano Largo. Sensing that this situation had the potential to degenerate into something worse, the high command ordered the field command post at El Portillo to step up its attacks against this enemy unit. The meeting would have been adjourned as usual if it hadn't been for an Intelligence officer who arrived carrying an extremely worrying report: a large Salvadoran convoy, supported by tanks and artillery, was approaching the bridge over the Goascorán River. This intelligence had been confirmed by the forward air controllers operating near El Amatillo and several civilians who lived in the area. Fearing that the combat units in that battlefront wouldn't withstand an attack of such large proportions, the high command determined that it was time for the FAH to execute the 'maximum effort' that Colonel Soto Cano had been preparing during the day.[5] Hence, around 4:00 p.m., the six available F4U-5Ns left Toncontín and headed towards El Amatillo. Led by Major Colíndres, and loaded with AN-M30 and AN-M64 bombs, plus napalm canisters and rockets, the six fighters descended over the convoy as its trucks were crossing the bridge, and began bombing and strafing them. While this was happening, a FAH C-47, carrying 14 AN-M30 bombs, attacked the Salvadoran artillery positions at Las Lajas, El Ujuste and along the Inter-American Highway. As soon as the C-47 left, two T-28s arrived in the area and strafed the Salvadoran artillery positions, killing many soldiers in the process. The six Corsairs were finishing off with their 20mm cannons what was left of the large convoy, while the Salvadoran soldiers ran for cover. Minutes later, the Corsairs joined the T-28s in their attack against the enemy artillery. During one of the strafing runs, the F4U-5N piloted by Captain González was hit by ground fire in the right wing, forcing him to return to Toncontín. At 4:30 p.m., the T-28s and the remaining five Corsairs attacked the Salvadoran field command post at El Amatillo and other combat and artillery positions near the border. Fifteen minutes later, and for the first time since the beginning of the war, the Salvadoran howitzers were silenced, while the surviving troops were running scared towards the border.

At 5:00 p.m., while the dust was still settling at El Amatillo, President Sánchez Hernández notified the OAS' Consulting Body that the government of El Salvador had agreed on, and accepted, the ceasefire proposal. Until this day, it is not known if the Salvadoran president made that decision after receiving the news of the major setback suffered by the Army at El Amatillo, or if he was still confident that the offensive was going according to plan. In any case, the OAS seized the opportunity and notified President López

Arellano that the proposal had been accepted by his counterpart, and that the ceasefire would be enforced at 10:00 p.m..

Under these circumstances, the Honduran high command rushed to implement its last tactical movements in order to secure the Nueva Ocotepeque front before the ceasefire. The 2nd Infantry Battalion was ordered to depart Perquín and Arambala for Sabanetas, as the entire unit would be airlifted to Santa Rosa de Copán in order to reinforce the El Portillo and La Labor combat posts. Troops from the *Guardia de Honor*, stationed at Tegucigalpa, were then ordered to depart for Sabanetas and take over the combat post there.

General Medrano attempted one last time to attack and seize La Labor, but after three hours of heavy combat, the Hondurans managed to repel them, pushing them back to Plan del Rancho. By contrast, the column led by Captain Fabián had managed to reach San Marcos Ocotepeque and had taken up positions around the town, while its reinforcements were on their way. Incredibly, the Hondurans had lost track of this Salvadoran unit, and no one had considered the damage it could inflict if it decided to launch an attack.

At Ilopango, Ben Hall, Chuck Lyford and Bob Love, the three North American pilots whom the Salvadoran government had hired to fly the Mustang IIs, received the news of the ceasefire with mixed feelings. They had spent the entire day aligning the aircraft's machine guns to the gun sights they had manufactured the night before, as well as finishing the installation of the armour plates in the cockpits. As hard as they had tried, the Mustang IIs hadn't been ready when the high command launched the final push at El Amatillo. Now, with the war nearing its end, they wouldn't be able to collect the extra pay for the combat missions that they had been offered. Ironically, whilst they were finishing off the work on the Mustang IIs, Chancellor Sevilla Sacasa was announcing on the TV that an agreement between the warring countries had been reached, and that the ceasefire would be enforced two hours later.

At 9:30 p.m., the high commands of both countries finally ordered all their combat units to return to their posts immediately and to get ready to enforce the ceasefire.[6] At this point, the Salvadorans still held the Honduran towns of La Virtud, Valladolid, Guarita and Cololaca, besides El Amatillo and Goascorán. On the Western front, the provincial city of Nueva Ocotepeque and the towns of El Pedregal and Sinuapa were still under their control.

Thirty minutes later, at 10:00 p.m., the guns finally fell silent.

9

THE WAR THAT NO ONE WON

Shortly after midnight on 19 July, the relative calm around the Salvadoran capital was ripped apart when an unmarked Lockheed L-749 'Constellation' (probably US civilian registration N1593V, msn 2556) made a dramatic appearance. With the powerful roar of its four Wright R-3350 engines echoing in the mountains around San Salvador, the huge airplane made its way to Ilopango Airport, where it finally landed. According to Chuck Lyford, as soon as the airplane had touched down, FAS ground personnel directed it towards the military ramp. Piqued by curiosity, the US pilot got near the 'Connie' and was able to see the FAS mechanics were unloading several crates, including some large ones, and then taking them to a hangar nearby. Minutes later, Lyford walked into the Officer's Club and found that the Constellation's Load Master was there, getting a sandwich, and decided to strike up a casual conversation with him. It didn't take long for Lyford to learn that the mysterious 'Connie' had brought a large load of spare parts and supplies for the North American P-51D Mustangs that the Salvadorans had just bought, and that were set to arrive in the following hours. The Load Master then confided that their flight from Fort Lauderdale had been really tiresome, as they had followed a rather circuitous route across the Caribbean in order to avoid detection by the US authorities. It was later established that the Salvadoran government, through Baldocchi, had acquired the spare parts and supplies from none other than the Confederate Air Force!

Back at Toncontin, Colonel Soto Cano had been instructed to airlift the entire 2nd Infantry Battalion from Sabanetas to Santa Rosa de Copan, in order to secure the Nueva Ocotepeque front. The problem was that, due to the ceasefire agreement, which mandated that the military aircraft from the warring countries were to stay on the ground, he couldn't use the FAH's own C-47s. With no alternative, the colonel rushed to get in touch with the civilian airlines TAN and SAHSA,[1] and, as before, requested their support. Around 4:00 a.m., the first of the C-47s borrowed from the civilian airlines departed

Toncontin for Sabanetas to pick up the first troops of the 2nd Infantry Battalion, followed by a second one, 30 minutes later. Due to the configuration of the aircraft's cabins, the soldiers had to be flown with only their rifles, while trucks transported the rest of their equipment. The first troops arrived in Santa Rosa de Copan at the break of dawn, and were immediately ordered to proceed towards La Labor and El Portillo.

While this was happening, the Salvadoran high command deemed it necessary to resupply the units operating at the Nueva Ocotepeque front, especially after the heavy fighting they had taken part in the day before. Major Henríquez was thus ordered to disregard the ceasefire's mandate and immediately send the FAS C-47s to parachute food and medicine over the combat posts that the Salvadorans still held.[2] Less than an hour later, the three available C-47s departed Ilopango, packed full of supplies for the starving troops. Then, around 7:00a.m., the high command was informed that the El Amatillo front still remained active, with a couple of combat posts of the 8th and 11th Infantry Battalions involved in intermittent skirmishes near Las Lajas and El Ujuste hill. Half an hour later, the field command post at Nueva Ocotepeque also reported that Honduran snipers were causing trouble around the provincial city and along the southern region of the La Chicotera hill. Since the situation had the potential to become a disaster, the high command decided to send the three remaining Mustang IIs in patrol flights over the areas that were being attacked by the Hondurans. Hence, near 8:00 a.m., Love, Lyford and Hall departed Ilopango and headed towards their designated areas, in what was their very first combat mission with the Salvadoran Air Force.

Salvadoran Mustang II, FAS-403, being readied for a patrol mission at the Madresal Island airstrip. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

After the ceasefire, Chuck Lyford and the other two North American pilots hired by the Salvadoran Air Force deployed constantly to the Madresal Island airstrip, from where they conducted patrol flights over the border with Honduras. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

Salvadoran Mustang II, FAS-403, with Chuck Lyford in the cockpit, at the Madresal Island airstrip, ready for take-off on a patrol mission. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

This PanAm stewardess was stranded in El Salvador with her crew during the war. As she was short on clothes, Chuck Lyford took her to the Salvadoran Air Force's tailor shop, where they made this little outfit for her in no time, using flight suits. Incidentally, the makeshift gun sight that Lyford and the other pilots built can be seen in the Mustang's cockpit, as well as the

stainless steel rod installed over the cowling. The airplane was one of the two Mustangs that arrived in El Salvador after the ceasefire, and was assigned the serial FAS-407. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

Even though the North American pilots had been warned about not entering Honduran airspace, they had orders to protect any Salvadorans that may come under attack. How they would accomplish this was anyone's guess, since the Mustang IIs didn't have any means to communicate with the ground troops.[3] That, however, wasn't among their priorities, because in the back of their minds, they were eager to face the Honduran Corsairs to 'even the score' and collect the $2,500 that they had been offered for each aircraft they could shoot down.[4] When the Mustang IIs arrived over the first area they were ordered to patrol, their mission suddenly took an awkward turn when the nervous Salvadoran soldiers mistook them for Honduran airplanes and began firing at them with all they had. Lyford and Hall quickly managed to climb away, but Love's airplane was hit several times in the tail, and the pilot was forced to call off the mission before returning to Ilopango.[5] Lyford later located what he thought was a Honduran fuel tanker truck near Nueva Ocotepeque, and without thinking twice, he strafed the vehicle, blowing it to pieces.[6] Unfortunately, it turned out that the truck was carrying drinking water for the Salvadoran combat units that were stationed in the provincial city.

Upon returning to Ilopango, the pilots told Major Henríquez about the 'friendly fire' incident they had narrowly survived, and promptly requested that identification markings were painted on every combat aircraft the FAS had.[7] During the rest of the afternoon, the FAS mechanics, along with the three pilots, sprayed bright yellow bands on the wings and fuselage of the three Mustang IIs and the surviving FG-1D. Major Henríquez informed the high command about the incident, and requested that the ground forces be warned about not shooting at airplanes sporting the yellow marks. Much to the pilots' dismay, his efforts proved futile because the Salvadoran troops kept firing at the FAS aircraft whenever they showed up over their heads.

Cavalier F-51D Mustang 750, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-406. This airplane arrived in El Salvador the day after the ceasefire. It was part of a batch of seven that the Salvadorans had acquired from civilian sources in the US. (Photo credit: Guido Buehlman, via Dan Hagedorn)

North American F-51D Mustang, Salvadoran Air Force serial FAS-407. Along with FAS-406, this airplane arrived in El Salvador the day after the ceasefire. It was part of the batch of 'stock' Mustangs that the Salvadoran government acquired from civilian sources in the US. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

Posing with the F-51D serialled FAS- 406, from left to right: Red Gray, Chuck Lyford and Jerry Fred Delarm. Gray and Delarm had ferried the first two 'stock' Mustangs to El Salvador after the war. As was the case with Lyford, both were hired by the Salvadoran Air Force to conduct patrol flights in the Mustangs and train the local pilots in the type. (Photo credit: Chuck Lyford)

Shortly after sunset, the first two Mustangs of the batch of seven that the Salvadoran government had recently purchased finally landed at Ilopango. One of them, a Cavalier Mustang 750, received the FAS serial 406 (ex-USAAF 44-73656, ex-N5073K); the other, serialled 407 in the FAS numbering system, was a 'stock' North American F-51D whose identity hasn't been established, even to this day. After landing, both fighters were taken straight to Baldocchi's hangar in order to begin their re-militarization, a process that involved installing the .50 cal machine guns, the gun sight system that Baldocchi and Lyford had designed and a pair of bomb-racks. Interestingly, the machine guns installed in these Mustangs had been retrieved from a handful of FG- 1Ds that were no longer in service, and that were scattered around the famous 'Ilopango Junkyard'. The bomb-racks, on the other hand, had been removed from the Mustang IIs, which had three under each wing, leaving them with only two. As for the gun sight system, Lyford described it in an interview with the authors:

> We installed a vertical stainless steel rod on the top of the cowling in front of the windscreen. Then, when harmonizing the guns – one at a time we altered the setting from about 1,700ft to about 600ft. Using black tape, we wrapped it around that stainless steel upright, and made a 'cross' on the inside of the windscreen corresponding to the ideal 'sweet spot' for each pilot. Using the black cross of tape and the stainless steel upright, we had a very effective and accurate gun sight![8]

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Mustangs' arrival was the characters who had ferried them. One was Red Gray, a 7ft giant who had flown with the RAF during the Second World War, and didn't waste any time in establishing his residence in San Salvador. Always eager for adventure, in December 1969 he got involved in a really dangerous mission that required flying General Omar Torrijos, the Panamanian strongman, back to his country. At the time, a coup was in progress in Panama and Torrijos had to return immediately to regain power and thwart the uprising. After that, Gray remained in the country and, years later, lost his life flying a civilian aircraft. Nowadays, a street in the provincial city of David, in Chiriquí, bears his name. The other pilot was Jerry Fred Delarm, a North American who had

been involved in most of the Central American revolutions that required any sort of combat flying, including the 1954 CIA-sponsored operation PBSuccess, which ousted Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz. The FAS promptly hired these two pilots and appointed them captains, and as had occurred with Lyford and his companions, they were issued with fake IDs and warned to stay out of public view.

403

Trans Florida Aviation F-51D, FAS-403, during one of the patrol flights that were conducted after the war. Note that by this time, the airplanes were carrying yellow identification bands on the wings and fuselage. This measure was adopted because the Salvadoran soldiers constantly fired at the aircraft. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

On 20 July, the Salvadoran column led by Captain Fabián finally seized San Marcos Ocotepeque,[9] much to the chagrin ofthe Hondurans, who had failed miserably to put up any opposition. Interestingly, Captain Fabián had carried out this operation without the approval of the Salvadoran high command. It wasn't until 26 July that a FAS C-47 spotted them and proceeded to parachute much-needed supplies over them. The following day, and already confident that San Marcos Ocotepeque was secure, the Salvadoran high command ordered the FAS to start using the town's airstrip for resupplying the combat units still holding ground in the region. It was also around this time that General Medrano's column was able to finally arrive in San Marcos Ocotepeque, after having been lost for a week in the ravines near Plan del Rancho.

By 30 July, almost all of the recently acquired Mustangs had arrived in Ilopango, and the FAS mechanics, under Baldocchi's close supervision, were finishing their re-militarization. Even Baldocchi's own Mustang had received a hastily applied camouflage pattern and been moved to the airport's alert apron. By then, the foreign pilots hired by the FAS had become familiar with the terrain and their machines, and were constantly flying patrol missions along the border. According to witnesses, during these flights the pilots "were always trying to outdo the other", and some of these came close to having dramatic endings.[10] On one occasion, while conducting a highspeed low-level training flight, Jerry Delarm narrowly avoided hitting a high-tension line strung between 50ft towers. However, a young FAS lieutenant who was flying Delarm's wing, was unable to avoid them and hit them directly, prompting him to return to Ilopango immediately, albeit without the canopy and parts of the stabilizer, and trailing 75ft of high-tension cable. A couple of days later, it was Red Gray who had an awkward episode when, upon returning from a sortie and while attempting to turn off the Ilopango primary roll-out, he inadvertently hit the gun button on his control stick, which would not release. Fortunately, besides the terrifying moment that the FAS personnel experienced, no one was injured.

The last surviving Salvadoran FG-1D in flying conditions after the cease-fire was this one, serialled FAS-215. At the time when this photo was taken, the airplane still sported traces of the camouflage pattern applied in May 1967, and was carrying the yellow identification bands on the wings and fuselage that were painted shortly after the end of the war on all the FAS aircraft. (Photo credit: Guido Buehlman, via Dan Hagedorn.)

North American F-51D, FAS-402, formerly civilian registration YS-210P, photographed on the Ilopango alert apron after the war. Despite its battered appearance, the airplane was still flyable and conducted several patrol missions over the border with Honduras. As was the case with the rest of the Salvadoran combat fleet, the Mustang sported the yellow identification bands applied shortly after the ceasefire. (Photo credit: Guido Buehlman, via Dan Hagedorn)

Even though it didn't fly any combat missions, this Salvadoran North American SNJ-5 was very active during the war, conducting liaison missions to the dispersal airfields that the Salvadoran Air Force established across the country. In this photograph, taken after the ceasefire, the airplane had just landed at the Madresal Island airstrip. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

Contrary to many reports, the first Salvadoran Douglas B-26 arrived in the country more than two weeks after the ceasefire. In this photograph, the bomber is being readied for a training mission at Ilopango airbase. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi.)

This photograph, taken in late September 1969, shows the only surviving FG-1D of the Salvadoran Air Force, parked on the alert apron of Ilopango Airport. Even though hostilities had ceased, the Salvadoran Air Force always kept a couple of its fighters ready for take-off. (Photo credit: Archie Baldocchi)

On the diplomatic front, the OAS was failing miserably in getting the Salvadoran troops out of Honduras. President Sánchez Hernández had managed to resist the pressure that the international body had exerted so far, including a myriad of persuasive manoeuvres and the threat of harsh economic sanctions against El Salvador. It wasn't until 29 July, when the country was close to being declared as the aggressor by the OAS, that the Salvadoran high command ordered the first massive withdrawal of Salvadoran troops from Honduran territory, effectively ending the conflict. Days later, on 6 August, the Salvadoran government organised a 'Victory Parade' to welcome the returning troops, an event that included the participation of the FAS. According to Lyford, this involved a maximum effort on the part of the air arm, during which virtually any aircraft which could fly was instructed to make repeated passes over the parade down Avenida Roosevelt.[11] He made at least four himself, and during the first pass,

he realised that his aircraft was fully armed, so he flew over to the far side of the volcano located north-west of San Salvador, and expended all his ammunition over a small valley covered by dry lava near ‘El Jabalí’. When he landed to refuel, the FAS mechanics immediately started to rearm his aircraft, and he had to tell them not to do so!

Two days after the ‘Victory Parade’, Bob Love and Ben Hall departed the country. Lyford, for his part, stayed for a week more in order to coordinate the acquisition of a pair of additional ‘stock’ P-51Ds, and then he left too. By contrast, Jerry Delarm had to be hustled out of the country shortly after, as he got involved in the murder of a Salvadoran. Red Gray, as has already been mentioned, remained in El Salvador and became part of the country’s general aviation community. By then, the FAS had already entered into a renovation phase. Their rapid neutralization in the middle of the war had forced the air arm’s staff, and their own commander, to redefine their objectives, something that contributed in large measure to helping the FAS to revive soon after, transformed into a very professional air arm, with much better equipment. During the second week of August, the service acquired its very first dedicated bomber from civilian sources, this being a Douglas TB-26B Invader (ex-USAAF 44-34722, ex-N3222T), which was followed by a second one a couple of days later (B-26B, ex-USAAF 41-39472, ex-N86482).[12] It is worth mentioning here that, while Honduran historians insist on affirming that at least one of these bombers participated in the war, their arrival in Ilopango definitely occurred after the ceasefire had been enforced. This has been confirmed repeatedly, not only by FAS personnel who served during the war, but by the few Salvadoran aero-historians who had researched the subject for many years.

Regarding the Salvadoran Armed Forces, the level of popularity they had obtained during the war dissipated quickly in the weeks following the ceasefire, giving way to severe criticism from the people, the press and even from lower-rank officers, as they were blamed for the poor results of the military adventure, despite the surprisingly good performance that the Salvadoran troops had shown. Inevitably, a severe division in the ranks of the Army soon followed, one that lasted for several years. To make things worse, in the months following the war, the social unrest became an acute problem that subsequent governments were unable to handle, and by 1979, the country was in the middle of a bloody civil war that left more than 75,000 killed.

In Honduras, on the other hand, the war caused an unprecedented result,

despite what was considered a humiliating defeat of the Honduran Armed Forces, since following the ceasefire, there was an impressive surge of patriotism and the ties of unity in society grew stronger. The fact that thousands of civilians had voluntarily approached the Army to offer their services in defence of their country, most of them only armed with sticks and machetes, obliged the Honduran authorities to pay more attention to the development and economic well-being of the people, in a clear sign of gratitude for that gesture. Perhaps the only bright spot of this brief, inglorious conflict, was the fact that the FAH was able to establish nearly complete air superiority over its own territory during the war, negating the Salvadorans troops any freedom of movement that would have ended with the taking of Tegucigalpa and possibly other important cities on the Caribbean coast, such as San Pedro Sula and Puerto Cortés. The FAH's outstanding performance also confirmed the wisdom of trusting the national defence to military aviation, a train of thought that the Honduran Army high command finally accepted, and that gave way to an impressive re-equipping of the air arm, during which it would become the most important air force in the Central American region.

Finally, one aspect of the war that remains unclarified, even to this day, is that of casualties. The Salvadoran Army confirmed that 107 of its soldiers were killed during the war, while the Hondurans reported 99. In harsh contrast, some sources state that no less than 2,000 civilians from both countries were killed during the military operations or as a result of the excesses committed by soldiers from both armies. Sadly, the exact number will probably never be known.

The war – as such – lasted only four days. However, it took more than two decades for Honduras and El Salvador to reach a peaceful agreement that benefitted both and allowed them to rebuild their bilateral relations. The only thing that never went away, though, was the animosity ingrained in the minds of the people of both countries. From time to time, it raises its ugly head and reminds everyone about those dark days when common sense was the first casualty in a conflict that should never have happened.

APPENDIX A

SALVADORAN AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT, JULY 1969

Unfortunately, the Salvadoran Air Force doesn't have or hasn't made public its records from the war. What follows is a very incomplete list of the aircraft that were active during the July 1969 emergency, which has been painstakingly put together by local aero-historians along the years.

Type	MSN	Prev. ID	FAS Serial	Comments
North American SNJ 5	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-78	Reported as active during the war, but there are no records about its participation. Fate unknown.
Cessna U-17A	185-0914	65-10847	FAS-80	Participated in the initial bombing mission on July 14. Fate unknown.
Cessna U-17A	185-0917	65-10848	FAS-81	Participated in the initial bombing mission on July 14. Fate unknown.
Cessna U-17A	185-0918	65-10849	FAS-82	Participated in the initial bombing mission on July 14. Fate unknown.
Cessna U-17A	185-0920	65-10850	FAS-83	Participated in the initial bombing mission on July 14. Fate unknown.
Cessna U-17A	185-0922	65-10851	FAS-84	Participated in the initial bombing mission on July 14. Fate unknown.
Cessna T-41A	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-90	Involved in liaisons and training duties during the war. Fate unknown.
Cessna T-41A	172-53363	65-5132	FAS-91	Involved in liaisons and training duties during the war. Fate unknown.
Cessna T-41A	172-52895	65-5133	FAS-92	Involved in liaisons and training duties during the war. Fate unknown.
Cessna T-41A	Unknown	65-5226	FAS-93	Involved in liaisons and training duties during the war. Fate unknown.
Cessna T-41C	R172/0283	68-7892	FAS-94	Involved in liaisons and training duties during the war. Fate unknown.
Douglas C-47	14912/26357	43-49096	FAS-103	Second use of the FAS serial number. MSN not confirmed. It was delivered in May 1968. Participated in the bombing mission on July 14.
Douglas C-47	15588/27033	43-49772A	FAS-104	Involved in tactical and logistical missions during the war. Fate unknown.
Douglas C-47	15314/26759	43-49498	FAS-105	Involved in tactical and logistical missions during the war. Fate unknown.
Douglas C-47	11867	42-92104	FAS-106	Involved in tactical and logistical missions during the war. Fate unknown.
Douglas VC-47	16788/33536	44-77204	FAS-107	Involved in tactical and logistical missions during the war. Fate unknown.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	BuNo 67071	FAS-202	One of the two FG-1Ds shot down on July 17. BuNo not confirmed.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	BuNo 67070	FAS-203	Crashed in May 1958 at Ilopango. Was used as spare source during the war. BuNo not confirmed.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-204	One of the two FG-1Ds shot down on July 17.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	BuNo 92629	FAS-215	Sold as N62290, currently owned by the Palm Springs Air Museum, in California.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-219	Probably shot down by "friendly fire" on July 17. It also has been reported as one of the two FG-1Ds shot down on that same date.
Goodyear FG-1D	Unknown	BuNo 92095	FAS-220	Damaged by ground fire over Toncontín, on July 15. Sold to Bill Harrison and Terry Randal in 1974, as N62344.
Canadair DC-4M	114	YS-27C	FAS-300	Acquired in 1968. Fate unknown.
Cavalier TF-51D	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-400	Interned in Guatemala on July 14. Delivered back to the FAS after the war. Was involved in an accident and was used for spares.
Trans Florida Aviation F-51D	Unknown	45-11559	FAS-401	Previous ID most probably false. Sold to the U.S. in October 1974, as N30FF.
North American P-51D	Unknown	44-73350, N6176C, YS-210P	FAS-402	Owned by Archie Baldocchi before the war. Second use of the serial number 402. Sold to the U.S. in October 1974, as N33FF.
Trans Florida Aviation F-51D	Unknown	44-73350	FAS-403	Made an emergency landing in 1972. Sold to the U.S. in October 1974, as N36FF.
Trans Florida Aviation F-51D	Unknown	Unknown	FAS-404	Shot down on July 17. Capt. Douglas Varela killed.
Trans Florida Aviation F-51D	Unknown	44-10753	FAS-405	Previous ID most probably false. Sold to the U.S. in October 1974, as N31FF. Currently flying as NL405HC

APPENDIX B

HONDURAN AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT, JULY 1969

The following list details the aircraft that the Honduran Air Force had in service during the conflict. When possible, the information had been confirmed by official sources and local aero-historians.

Type	MSN	Prev. ID	FAH Serial	Comments
Beechcraft C-45	Unknown	Unknown	FAH-105	Preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
Cessna 180	Unknown	Unknown	FAH-108	Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Cessna U-17A	185-0632	63-13135	FAH-111	Preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
Cessna 185B	185-0521	HR-199	FAH-113	MSN not confirmed. Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Cessna 185D	185-0829	N1511F	FAH-114	MSN not confirmed. Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Cessna 170	Unknown	Unknown	FAH-115	Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
North American SNJ-4	88-12827	BuNo 27491	FAH-202	Flew patrol and close air support missions during the war. Acquired by Gordon Plaskett/ B & G Aero in 1983.
North American SNJ-4	88-9549	BuNo 09990	FAH-205	Flew patrol and close air support missions during the war. Preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
North American T-6G	Unknown	51-16075	FAH-206	Acquired by Gordon Plaskett/ B & G Aero in 1983.
North American T-6G	182-603	51-14916	FAH-208	Acquired by Gordon Plaskett/ B & G Aero in 1983.
North American T-6G	168-102	49-2998	FAH-211	Acquired by Gordon Plaskett/ B & G Aero in 1983.
North American T-28A	Unknown	50-272	FAH-212	Flew patrol and close air support missions during the war. On July 15, while flown by Lt. Roberto Mendoza, this aircraft damaged a Salvadoran FG-1D over Toncontín. Acquired by Courtesy Aircraft Inc. in 1985.
North American T-28A	Unknown	50-267	FAH-213	Flew patrol and close air support missions during the war. Acquired by Courtesy Aircraft Inc. in 1985.
North American T-28A	Unknown	50-293	FAH-214	Previous ID not confirmed. Acquired by Courtesy Aircraft Inc. in 1985.
North American T-28A	Unknown	50-234	FAH-215	Acquired by Courtesy Aircraft Inc. in 1985.
North American T-28A	Unknown	50-230	FAH-216	Crashed on February 8, 1973.
Douglas C-47DL	6096	41-18690	FAH-301	Crashed on July 26, 1977.
Douglas C-53D-DO	11696	42-68769	FAH-302	Re-serialled as FAH-321 after the conflict. Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Douglas C-47A-20-DL	12962	42-93089	FAH-304	Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Douglas C-47A-75-DL	19426	42-100933	FAH-305	Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Douglas C-47D	13642	42-93701A	FAH-306	Preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
Douglas C-47B-15-DK	26765/15320	43-49504	FAH-307	Withdrawn from use. Its remains are at the Toncontín junkyard.
Vought F4U-5NL	Unknown	BuNo 124724	FAH-600	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-5N	Unknown	BuNo 124560	FAH-601	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-5	Unknown	BuNo 122179	FAH-604	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-5N	Unknown	BuNo 122184	FAH-605	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-5N	Unknown	BuNo 124486	FAH-606	Nicknamed "Cantarranas" after a town in the Francisco Morazán Department. Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-5N	Unknown	BuNo 124715	FAH-609	Shot down two Salvadoran FG-1Ds and an F-51D on July 17, while flown by Capt. Fernando Soto. Preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
Vought F4U-4	Unknown	BuNo 97382	FAH-611	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-4	Unknown	BuNo 97288	FAH-612	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-4	Unknown	BuNo 96995	FAH-614	Sported a non-standard "Light Gray" color scheme during the war. Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-4	Unknown	BuNo 97280	FAH-615	Acquired by Howard Pardue and Robert L. Ferguson in 1979.
Vought F4U-4	Unknown	BuNo 97059	FAH-617	Interned in Guatemala on July 15, 1969, while flown by Cpt. Walter Lopez. Returned to the FAH after the war. Its fuselage is preserved at the Honduran Air Museum, in Tegucigalpa.
Douglas C-54B-15-DO	18382	43-17182	FAH-795	Damaged during hard landing in 1973. Cannibalized.

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NOTES

Chapter I

1 This derogatory term was used for the first time by the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, in a news report for the Polish News Agency dated 14 July 1969. Kapuściński was in Tegucigalpa when the war began, and travelled to the southern battlefront the following day, from where he sent several additional dispatches detailing the military operations being conducted. In 1978, Kapuściński published a book using precisely that term as the title.

2 Anderson, *The War of the Dispossessed* (University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p.49.

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4 Ibid, p.55.

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9 Ibid, p.62.

10 Ibid, p.79.

11 Ibid, p.75.

12 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2002), p.42.

13 Ibid, p.66.

14 Ibid, p.44.

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17 Ibid, p.86.

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20 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2002), p.57.

21 Ibid, pp. 5960.

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1 These observations were made by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Griemsmann, Chief of

the Air Force Section of the US Military Group in El Salvador, in a report dated 6 January 1969.

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2 Anderson, *The War of the Dispossessed* (University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p.102.

3 Ibid, p.103.

4 Ibid, pp.10708.

5 Ibid, p.70.

6 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2002), p.105.

7 Ibid, p.108.

8 Ibid, p.109.

9 Henríquez, *En el Cielo Escribieron Historia* (National Typography Workshops, 1972), p.60.

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11 Ibid, p. 110.

12 Ibid, p.70.

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2 Ibid, p.146.

3 Ibid, p.144.

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5 Henríquez, *En el Cielo Escribieron Historia* (National Typography Workshops, 1972), p.55.

6 Ibid, p.51.

7 Paz Reyes, *Operaciones Aéreas – 1969* (Honduran Air Force History Department, 1984), p.16

8 Ibid, p.37.

9 Ibid, p.23.

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11 Ibid, p.37.

12 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2014), p.145

13 Ibid, p. 153.

14 Ibid, p. 151.

15 Henríquez, *En el Cielo Escribieron Historia* (National Typography Workshops, 1972), p.55.

16 Ibid, p.. 56.

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1 Henríquez, *En el Cielo Escribieron Historia* (National Typography Workshops, 1972), p.62.

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5 Ibid, p.180.

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7 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2014), p.179.

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10 Ibid, p.196.

11 Paz Reyes, *Operaciones Aéreas – 1969* (Honduran Air Force History Department, 1984), p.130.

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2 Ibid, p.228.

3 Ibid, p.235.

4 Ibid, p.230.

5 Lyford and Barrett, ‘Corsairs vs. Mustangs: The Last Dogfight' *Flight Journal* magazine (December 2012), p.17.

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9 Ibid, p.361.

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10 Ibid, p.91.

11 This was confirmed by Chuck Lyford himself, during an interview in January 2017, contrary to the version of their arrival in Ilopango, as published in the *Flight Journal* article of 2012.

12 Interview with Chuck Lyford, January 2017.

13 Elvir Sierra, *El Salvador, Estados Unidos y Honduras* (Litografía López, 2014), pp.27485.

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6 Ibid, p.313.

Chapter IX

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2 Ibid, p.318.

3 It was much later that Archie Baldocchi managed to acquire a handful of radios from the Panamanian Defence Force. These radios, which had been used in jeeps, were modified in order to fit in the cockpit of the FAS Mustangs, right behind the pilot's seat.

4 Lyford and Barrett, 'Corsairs vs. Mustangs: The Last Dogfight' *Flight Journal* magazine (December 2012), p.22. Also, interview with Chuck Lyford, January 2017.

5 Interview with Chuck Lyford, January 2017.

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11 Interview with Chuck Lyford, January 2017.

12 In total, the FAS acquired six Douglas B-26s between August 1969 and May 1970, including one ex-Guatemalan Air Force bomber, which was purchased from a 'civilian' from that country, at least according to some sources.

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The ‘100-hour war’ has always been a difficult subject to research. Unbiased sources are very hard to come by and, if that wasn’t enough, there are simply too many layers of myths, legends and shameless nationalist propaganda that need to be sorted out in order to determine what really happened. Fortunately, along our journey navigating the intricacies of the conflict, we had outstanding help. In Honduras, our good friend and excellent aero-historian, Amado Aguiluz, was always available for answering our questions and shared with us his invaluable files. Marco Lavagnino, another excellent aero- historian and long-time friend, helped us understand the most obscure aspects of the Salvadoran Air Force, its aircraft and the missions they flew during the conflict. As usual, our mentor Gary Kuhn came to the rescue, pointing the way at times when the research had reached a dead end or by providing books that we thought were impossible to find. John Davis, another long-time friend and superb aero- historian, helped us identifying many of the civilian airplanes that flew dangerous missions during the war, even when he had his hands full. Our gratitude goes also to Chuck Lyford, who didn’t hesitate and answered patiently many questions we had regarding the confusing days after the ceasefire and the legendary Salvadoran Mustangs. Lastly, we must thank Colonel César Elvir Sierra, who went out of his way and sent us his excellent book about the war and helped us answering our questions and Raphael Belthrand for contributing really hard to find information about the Salvadoran civilian airplanes that took part in the initial airstrikes. To all of them, thank you!

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Douglas C-47 'FAS-104' – At the war's outbreak, the Salvadoran Air Force had five Douglas C-47 transports, which were used not only for logistical purposes during the conflict, but also as bombers. FAS-104 attacked Toncontín Airport, in Tegucigalpa, during the initial airstrike launched by the Salvadorans on 14 July 1969.

Goodyear FG-1D 'FAS-220' – When the war began, the Salvadoran Air Force had six Corsairs in its 'Fighter Bomber' squadron. Contrary to popular belief, the camouflage pattern sported by these airplanes wasn't applied shortly before the war, but almost two years earlier, during a Nacional 'emergency' that occurred in May 1967. Also of interest are the locally built bomb-racks that the Corsairs carried, and that were adapted to the rocket launchers' pylons. Each of these devices could carry an AN-M30 100lb general purpose bomb.

Trans Florida Aviation F-51 Mustang II 'FAS-405' – Under special provisions of the US Military Sales Program, El Salvador acquired six of these versatile attack airplanes in September 1968. Unfortunately, the Salvadoran pilots were intimidated by such a 'hot' aircraft type and were reluctant to fly them in combat, opting instead to fly their old and battered Corsairs whenever they could.

Cessna U-17A 'FAS-80' – When the war began, the Salvadoran Air Force had five of these aircraft in its inventory. During the initial airstrike against Honduras on 14 July, the U-17As, along with other civilian airplanes, attacked several positions on the El Amatillo and Nueva Ocotepeque fronts with 60mm and 81mm mortar shells, which, strapped to the passenger's seat, were lobbed out by the pilot while banking steeply.

North American SNJ 5 'FAS 78' – The only 'Texan' in service with the Salvadoran Air Force during the war didn't see any combat. Instead, the venerable airplane was used for liaison duties and for keeping the dispersal airfields in communication.

Goodyear FG-1D 'FAS-215' – During the war, the Salvadoran Corsairs' camouflage pattern was hastily modified by applying tan or olive green splotches, usually by hand. Also, shortly after the ceasefire, yellow identification bands were painted on all military aircraft, in order to reduce the 'friendly fire' incidents.

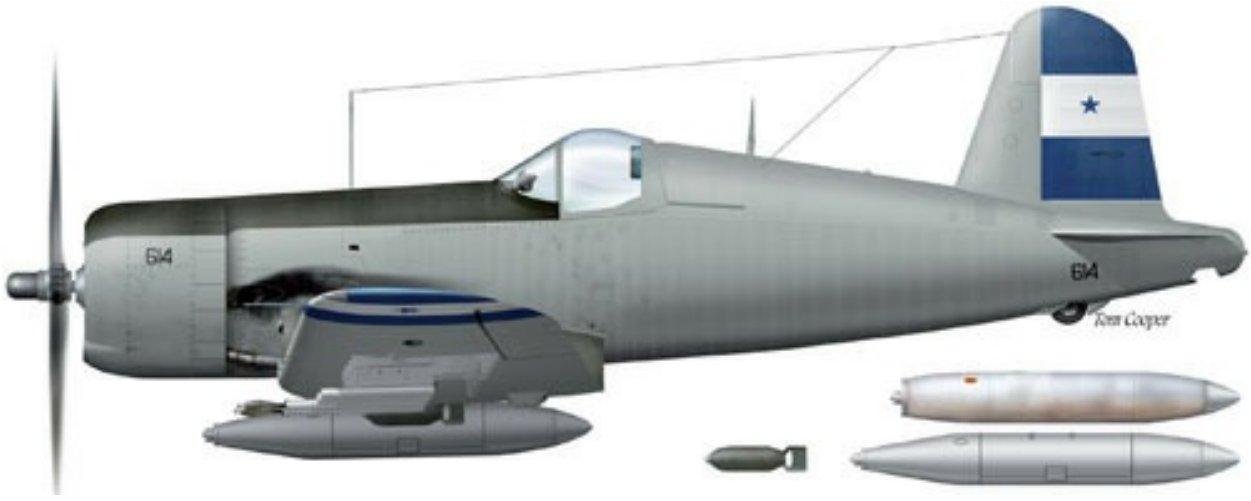
Trans Florida Aviation F-51 Mustang II 'FAS-403' – A few hours before the ceasefire, the three North American pilots hired by the Salvadoran Air Force to fly the Mustang IIs decided to remove the wings' tip tanks from the airplanes in order to improve their performance. However, they didn't manage to fly in any combat missions, since the war ended before they could get the airplanes ready. Shortly after the war's end, the surviving Mustang IIs also received the yellow identification bands that were applied to all the Salvadoran military aircraft.

Cavalier Mustang 750 'FAS-406' – This exotic bird arrived in El Salvador during the afternoon of 19 July, too late to take part in the war. As it came without any armament installed, the FAS mechanics had to re-militarize it, a process that included the installation of six .30 cal machine guns and a crude gunsight consisting of a steel rod bolted on the top of the cowling, a couple of inches in front of the windscreen

North American P-51D 'FAS-407' – This was the second Mustang that the Salvadorans acquired clandestinely from US civilian sources, and that also arrived too late to take part in the war. As in the case of the Cavalier Mustang 750, the FAS mechanics had to re-militarize this fighter shortly after its arrival, including the installation of the locally designed gunsight.

North American SNJ 4 'FAH-202' – During the war, the Honduran Air Force had in its inventory two SNJ 4s and three T-6Gs. However, only the former were equipped with machine guns. Based at Toncontín, these two armed trainers flew several patrol and close air support missions, alongside the T-28As.

Douglas C-47 'FAH-301' – As in the case of their Salvadoran counterparts, the Hondurans also used their C-47s as bombers. FAH-301 conducted an airstrike against Ilopango Airport during the early hours of 15 July, with inconclusive results.



Vought F4U-4 'FAH-614' – Hours before the war's outbreak, the Honduran F4U-4s were deployed to La Mesa airfield, in San Pedro Sula. As in the case of the '5N' Corsairs, these fighters proved to be invaluable in overturning the complicated situation of the ground forces operating on the Nueva Ocotepeque front. Of interest are the locally modified rockets that all the F4U-4s based at La Mesa carried, which had an 81mm mortar shell attached to their heads. FAH-614 was the only Honduran Corsair that sported this 'non-standard' Light Gray colour scheme during the conflict.

Vought F4U-4 'FAH-617' – This fighter sustained damage during the bombing of the port at Acajutla on 15 July. Flown by Captain Walter López, the Corsair had to make an emergency landing at a farm's airfield in Izabal, Guatemala, and spent the rest of the war interned in that country.

Vought F4U-5N 'FAH-601' – The '5N' Corsairs proved to be an invaluable asset for the Honduran Armed Forces, as they tipped the balance on the El Amatillo front when it seemed that the Salvadorans had a very good chance of winning the war. Flying out of Toncontín, these fighters usually carried AN-M30 and AN-M60 general purpose bombs, while conducting close air support missions.

Vought F4U-5N 'FAH-606' – This Corsair, nicknamed 'Cantarranas' in honour of a small village located in the Francisco Morazan Department, was based at Toncontín during the war and participated in several air superiority and close air support missions over the El Amatillo front, usually carrying AN-M30 and AN-M60 general purpose bombs, besides the deadly 'Pinas' (Pineapples), which were locally designed cluster bombs.

Vought F4U-5N 'FAH-609' – On 17 July, while flying this particular fighter, Captain Fernando Soto Henríquez managed to shoot down two Salvadoran FG-1Ds and a Mustang II. Based at Toncontín during the war, this airplane also conducted close air support missions over the El Amatillo front, usually carrying AN-M30 bombs and the infamous 'Pinas' cluster bombs.

North American T-28A 'FAH-213' – By July 1969, the Honduran Air Force had five 'Trojans' operative, but only two of them were armed with machine-gun pods. Based at Toncontín, these two airplanes flew several patrol and close air support missions during the war, mostly over the El Amatillo front, and one of them, flown by Lieutenant Roberto Mendoza, damaged a Salvadoran FG-1D during one of the attacks against the Honduran Air Force headquarters.

Cessna U-17A 'FAH-111' – The Honduran Air Force had, at the time of the war, a small array of utility airplanes, including this Cessna U-17A, which were used in liaison and logistical duties over the different combat fronts. In many cases, these missions were highly dangerous, not only due to the adverse weather conditions and the difficult terrain, but the presence of Salvadoran fighters.

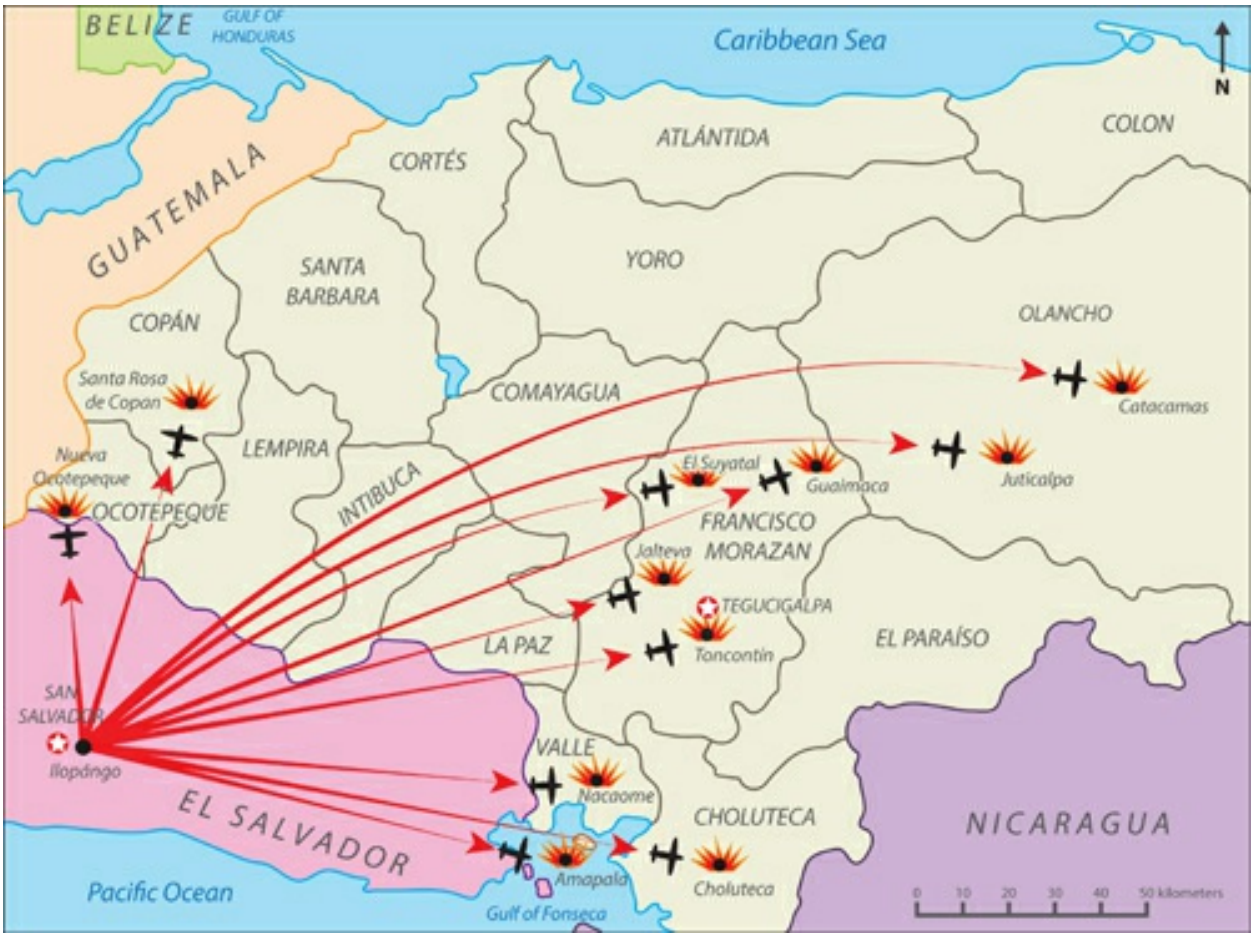
Cessna 310L 'YS-02-N' – This airplane, owned by the Salvadoran Instituto Geográfico Nacional (Nacional Geographic Institute) conducted several photo-reconnaissance missions over different areas of Honduras before the war's outbreak, and managed to do so virtually undetected by the Honduran Air Force.

Piper PA-28-235B 'YS-234-P' – This Cherokee, flown by Mr. Eduardo Llach Hill, was intercepted by a pair of Honduran T-28As while conducting a reconnaissance mission over the towns of Gualcinse and Candelaria on July 3, 1969. Incredibly, Mr. Llach was able to escape and returned to Ilopango unharmed.

Cessna T-41A 'FAS-91' – Along with the U-17As, the little Cessna T-41As of the Salvadoran Air Force took part on the initial airstrike against Honduras on 14 July, attacking several military positions in El Amatillo area with 60mm and 81mm mortar shells.

North American SNJ 5 "FAS 78" – A couple of months after the war's end, this airplane could be seen with parts of other aircraft installed in order to keep it flying. By then, it still was the only Texan in flying conditions with the Salvadoran Air Force.

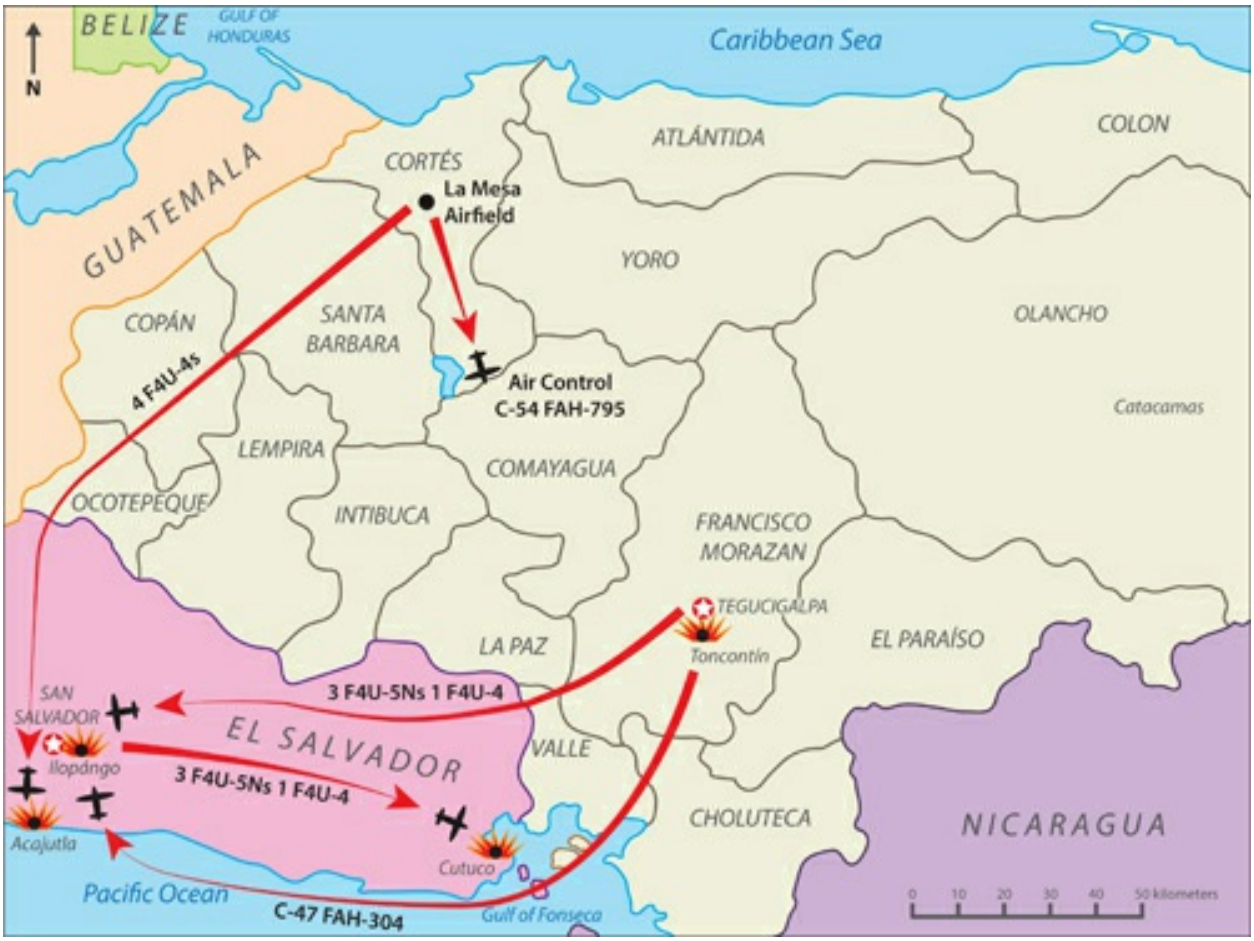
The Central American region. (Map by George Anderson)



The Salvadoran Air Force's plan for the initial airstrike launched on 14 July considered several strategic targets in Honduras. However, for reasons still unknown, the pilots failed to attack the majority of them. (Map by George Anderson, via Douglas Cornejo)

0
5
10 kilometers
N
EL
SALVADOR
HONDURAS
Aramecina
Langue
4th Battalion
Goascorán
Santa Rosa
de Lima
Pan American Highway
11th Battalion
El Amatillo
Pan American Highway
Special Forces
Río Goascorán
La Unión
Zacatillo
6th Battalion
Gulf of Fonseca
El
Tigre
Meanguere

The Salvadoran ground offensive on the El Amatillo front on 14 and 15 July. (Map by George Anderson via José Luis González Sibrián)



The Honduran Air Force's retaliatory airstrikes launched on 15 July. (Map by George Anderson via César Elvir Sierra)

The Salvadoran ground offensive on the Nueva Ocotepeque front on 15 and 16 July. (Map by George Anderson via José Luis González Sibrián)